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Feature What's next?

Our prelude to the next round of console wars



Reviewed God of War

Sony redefines cinematic action gaming



Interview Reggie!

Nintendo's man with the plan on all things NoA



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PlayStation 2



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The background of the entire page is a dark, atmospheric illustration. At the top center, a large, pale, screaming demon with a wide-open mouth and glowing eyes looms over the scene. To the left, a smaller, hunched demon with a single glowing eye and a skeletal face is visible. On the right, a Marine in full combat armor is shown from the waist up, holding a shotgun and looking towards the left. The background is filled with a dense web of red, vein-like patterns and a large, faint red symbol resembling a stylized 'X' or a demonic sigil.

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Letter from the Editor

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Space in time

There's no better time in a gamer's life than when fresh new hardware is just over the horizon, not only for the added thrills we get with each technological stride, but for the innovation they bring, and this round promises to deliver strides that could very well mark the final stage in the transformation of gaming from mass market niche to national pastime. One thing is certain: we're going to need more studios and, especially, better retail. The proliferation of more and more genres to appeal to an ever-widening user base is going to require a much larger development community than we currently have in place (take those courses, future game designers!), so one has to wonder how the infrastructure and, most of all, the retail delivery for that infrastructure will evolve in the years ahead.

For the likes of Peter Jackson, Steven Spielberg or James Cameron to commit to projects they actually direct as they would a film, we're going to need more than a few messy sleeves at the neighborhood superstore on which to display a limited number of games for a very limited time to justify their significant commitment and participation. I can go buy *A.I.*, *T2* or *Lord of the Rings* right now, but find me a copy of *Beyond Good and Evil*. There's that, plus the addition of games based on anything from TV dramas like *Desperate Housewives* (we have it on good authority that 18-35 females are about to get their fill in the next generation) to ever-cooler party and dance games to hyper-realistic simulations playing on the success of games like *The Sims* and *Rome: Total War*, which will have an even wider appeal when they begin to look better than photo-real. That's on top of the games that we're all dying to play from the likes of Kojima, Sakaguchi, Miyamoto, Yuji Naka, Igarashi, Itagaki and studios like Rare, Naughty Dog,

Insomniac, Shiny, Bungie, Valve and on and on; we're going to need more space!

Switching gears for a second, based on what we're learning about the next generation, we're looking at events akin to the 16-bit days, when the impending release of a big game brought on sleepless nights and butterflies in our stomachs; this is going to be a grand era to say the least. Of course, the proliferation and aftermath of increasingly realistic depictions of gang violence will likely pervade, as cashing in on society's ills has always been great for business, but, for the most part, I think that the next level of realism will result in more people gravitating toward fiction and fulfillment through rich storytelling, gameplay and escapism rather than the horror of pulling the trigger to see the realistic depiction of a fellow human's brains splattering onto a wall—or worse, the realistic portrayal of innocent victims being killed in the action—or at least that's my hope.

Getting back on topic, my bet is that a major overhaul is in the works to commence before the next round of hardware hits, much of which will play out online, unless retailers expand their space and inventories, which isn't likely. The best-case scenario would be the ability to buy or download direct from the publisher, negating the middle man (along with the added cost) and, more importantly, the limited selection they dictate. To the untrained eye examining the aisles of most superstores, what looks like the "it" game is often not. If Atlus had a triple-A game coming out at the same time as the next Street, for instance, you can bet EA would get 10 pockets and a neon arrow to Atlus' lone slot behind a bargain copy of *Blinx 2*. The quicker casual users' choices become based on most frequently downloaded content in accord with their personal preference, the better. That or they can just all subscribe to Play... Speaking of which, barring some unforeseen glitch, our new site should finally be live, so head to www.playmagazine.com. Let us know what you think!

"...we're going to need more than a few messy sleeves at the neighborhood superstore on which to display a limited number of games..."

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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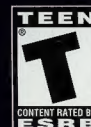
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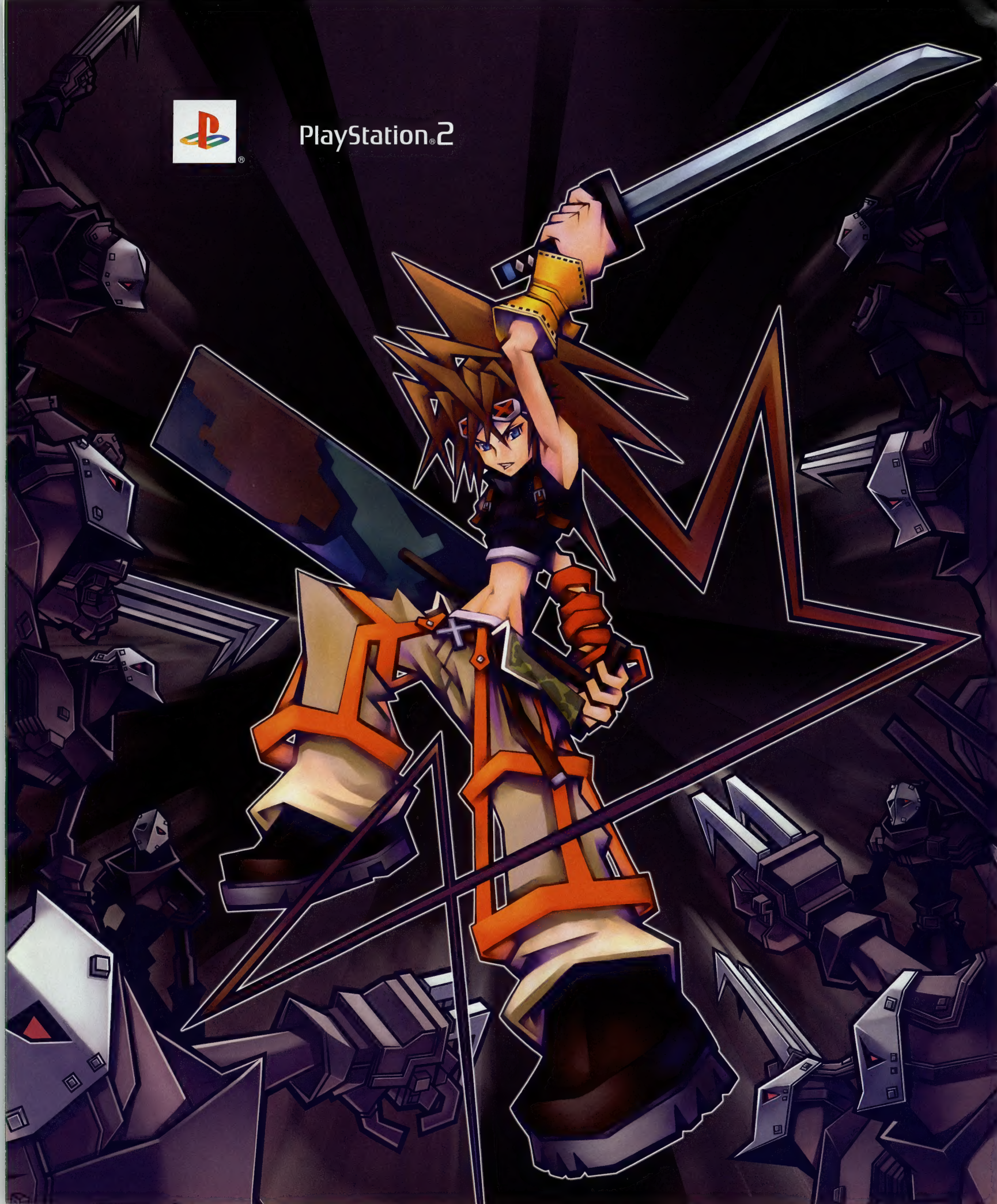
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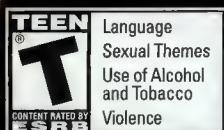
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No love for San Andreas?

Play is a great magazine. I understand that the editors and artists truly love games; it shows. I like the idea that your mag refuses to pander to any company just looking to cash in on gaming's popularity. I also appreciate the fact that your publication is not owned by a chain of software retailers. Because of all of these things, and because of your obvious love for what you do, I believe that Play magazine and its editors are an asset to every true gaming otaku. Having said all of this, though, I only have one question: what is your reason for leaving the latest Grand Theft Auto installment out of your 2004 year in review list? I noticed that it was not even nominated. Set aside storyline and character development. The sheer size and scope of this game warrants recognition for its technological achievement, don't you agree? Can you imagine Fable or Zelda or Resident Evil built on this gameplay model? Thanks for your time, keep doing what you do.

Jeff

We've been asked this quite a bit, and the truth is that there was no intentional snub; when we assembled as a group, it just didn't make the cut. Chalk it up to negative racial stereotypes, glorified murder, realistic killing, standing in a circle to trigger traditional missions... Sure it's big, but we'd rather see inspired design half the size; urban sprawls are urban sprawls. We respect GTA for what it is and how well it serves its flock; we're just not among them. Applied to a fantastical setting, it would likely be a different story.

Thanks for the Sega; now about SNK...

Thank you oh so very much for the Sega coverage in the March issue of Play. To me Sega always represented the most anyone could ask for out of a piece of gaming hardware and first party games. After the demise of the Dreamcast, Sega seemed to lose a lot of what made them great, but it sounds like they are ripe for a comeback. Now to talk about another company who's suffered financially not so long ago,

SNK. I think it would be great if Play could give us some insight into how things are progressing with them. It would be nice to see how and where their company is going, and also some in-depth coverage of their future games. I am very curious about what they intend to do with their franchises, especially given the fact that they all seem to be making the leap to 3D. As much as I loved KOF: MI, I would still rather have been playing a 2D KOF using modern hardware. Why is it that when companies that are famed for their mastery over 2D decide to upgrade they feel a necessity to go 3D? It seems as though the only developer pushing the power of a system sticking in the 2D realm is Arc System Works and their amazing Guilty Gear games. While on the subject of newly 3D games, what's up with Metal Slug? How's that one going to keep its

"...I am about as displeased as I can possibly be with the constant...over-praising of the PSP"

pace using 3D surroundings? I sure hope it does, but at the same time I doubt it will be able to. Luckily I did hear not that long ago that while SNK is making these new 3D games that they will continue with the 2D games that got them this far, and a little confirmation from you guys on this sure would ease my tension. Since I'm making game suggestions I also want a new Shenmue, Virtual On and Virtua Tennis from Sega. A new Street Fighter and Darkstalkers from Capcom, and lastly a new Rygar from Tecmo. Only one more thing I need answered: where is The Red Star?

Jake W.

We miss the old Sega too, which was our main reason for running the story, so we're happy with the reaction we're getting. We'll definitely be doing SNK in the near future. We too wish they'd stick with hand-drawn 2D and perhaps expand into more of their arsenal. A new 2D Magician Lord on today's hardware (PSP would be amazing) would be illegally gorgeous. We'll be seeing Metal Slug 3D very soon but

agree that there's a slim chance it will live up to the namesake. On the wish list front, a new Street Fighter was being considered almost a year ago, so that may be in the cards, and we're pretty sure Rygar is assured. As for Red Star, we're still searching and hoping. Rumor that Majesco picked it up proved false. We'll keep you posted.

PSP ain't all that?

As should be mandatory, I'm starting a bad letter with good news. I love Play, I really do. I am so happy that you decided to go with the 10 point reviewing system. The old four-star/five-circle/whatever system was really starting to irk me. I really like the 10-point system, and the 100 percent system is even better, but using the 10

points based in .5 increments is the next best thing. So your great reviews are backed up by a great system (finally).

Now on to the bad...I am about as displeased as I can possibly be with the constant (and I do mean CONSTANT) over-praising of the PSP. Yes, it's a fantastic piece of equipment and blah blah blah, but it's given too much credit... At least the PSP lives up to its name of being a portable PlayStation, because the majority of its games can already be played at home...on a PlayStation. I'll admit that I haven't had hands-on time with the system, but it doesn't seem to me that it offers anything new, or different. You have to understand that I've been gaming for a long time now (since the mid '80s), and I'm tired of seeing companies pass off old games as new ones. I realize that Nintendo is doing the same thing, but at least they're playing to their demographic by doing so. Mario 64 is older than a lot of kids that bought a DS system.

I feel so...frustrated whenever I read an interview from a Sony exec, or see something on TV from them (especially Kaz Hirai) because of how cocky and "I'm

better than you" they always are. It just seems so funny to me considering how inferior their hardware is. However...they end up with the games and that makes them act like they own the world. I know I sound so fanboyish, but I don't like seeing credit given where credit isn't due...

Am I just a jaded gamer? Do I expect too much when I want original game experiences, or vastly improved sequels? Am I the only person left that buys video game machines in order to play video games? So many questions...so few answers...

Jamie B.

Jamie, you're a tad jaded, but nothing we can't fix. PSP games are closer to PS2 quality, and although it does have its share of ports at launch, there are a ton of original games too, and lots more coming. PSP plays more like a console... You'll see...we hope.

Wanted: More Evil

I really dig your mag; content and design-wise, I find it very distinctive and fun to read through. That being said, what the hell's up with giving Resident Evil 4, a perfect 10 and your GAME OF THE MONTH, a review the size of a want ad?!? I realize you ran a cover feature on it two issues back (also great), but we're talking about one of the GREATEST GAMES EVER MADE here! I'm no RE fanboy. Before this one, I've only really played Code: Veronica on Dreamcast. But a game masterpiece must be given the attention it deserves, and I think, at the least, RE4 deserved a bigger review than Chicago Enforcer. Unless, of course, you guys were just at a loss for words, in which case I understand...

Unsigned

We actually gave it a 9.5, but we ran a small review because the game was long out by the time we hit (thanks, exclusive reviews!), and we'd already pledged our allegiance. In hindsight, a larger review would have been nice. We'd also completely extinguished our art supply...



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Sakaguchi joins team green

Final Fantasy creator prepares major next-gen RPG firepower

If you weren't already excited about the next-generation Xbox system, Microsoft has two words for you: Hironobu Sakaguchi. Clearly a response to the original Xbox's less-than-stellar performance in Japan, Sakaguchi, the man responsible for the creation of the legendary Final Fantasy series, will be joining Microsoft Game Studios as a first-party developer. Although no specific games or release dates were announced, Microsoft revealed that Sakaguchi is working on two games for Microsoft's next console, both RPGs and both exclusive to the system.

"Microsoft's cutting-edge technologies in the next-generation platform will allow me to bring to life an array of ideas that I have had for many years," stated Sakaguchi in a press announcement. "I want these games to be alive with a new vision for gaming and vividly depict new characters that will

transcend the game, find a place in the hearts of gamers, and make time spent with my games a fond and long-lasting memory."

Sakaguchi also commented that other "talented creators" would be joining him on the projects; composer Nobuo Uematsu, who also recently left Square Enix to become an independent creator, could be a likely candidate.

The new titles for Microsoft Game Studios will be Sakaguchi's first major game endeavors since the debacle of the *Final Fantasy: Spirits Within* CG film, which caused significant financial loss for Squaresoft and may have helped prompt its merger into Square Enix. Sakaguchi left Square Enix in 2004 to found Mistwalker Studios. How Microsoft's announcement affects Mistwalker, if at all, is unknown as of press time.

MISTWALKER

Imagery like this only hints at what we may see from Sakaguchi on Microsoft's next console.



PSP THEATRE

Coming soon to a PSP near you!

Making good on the promise of UMD movies to go with the PSP's exceptional launch game lineup, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment has announced five initial Universal Media Disc (UMD) format releases for April 19—*XXX*, *Hellboy*, *Resident Evil Apocalypse* and *Once Upon A Time in Mexico* at \$19.95, and *House of Flying Daggers*, day and date with the DVD at \$28.95—with additional titles to follow on a monthly basis. One of multiple lifestyle applications, including games,

music, movies, communication and wireless networking, the UMD is Sony's newly developed high-capacity optical format able to store up to 1.8 GB of digital data on a 60mm disc—or an entire feature film on a single UMD video for a true DVD-quality experience on the go, produced in 16:9 widescreen aspect ratio and encoded using advanced AVC compression, providing the type of picture quality we've come to expect from SPHE DVDs. And we thought the wheel was a cool invention.





I Am 8-bit

Retro gaming hits Hollywood



Coming at you like a VH1 special sans the B-list cameos, I Am 8-Bit pays homage to those unforgettable glory days of gaming back when a combination of pixels, flickering backgrounds and rhythmic bleeps was magically transformed into video game euphoria. Ninety-seven top artists working in various styles that predate 3D have lent their formidable talents to a collection of pre-'95 pieces you can see in person at Gallery Nineteen Ninety Eight & Acme Game Store in Hollywood, CA from April 20 through May 18 or online at www.iam8bit.net, where you can also find out about the opening-night festivities and how to purchase art and exclusive merchandise.

Even Miyamoto's monkey is getting in on the action of I Am 8-bit.



Xbox is smokin'!

Has your Xbox burst into flames recently? Microsoft says it's extremely unlikely (try a 1 in 10,000 chance), but the possibility is still something that they're taking seriously. The culprit is what Microsoft is calling "rare electrical component failures" caused by defective parts, which has resulted in a few dozen instances of damage worldwide (none of them serious as far as we know). In response to this potential hazard, Microsoft is offering free replacement power cords on affected machines, those being consoles manufactured before Oct. 23, 2003 in most regions of the world, with the exception being Europe, where any unit made before Jan. 13, 2004 is potentially problematic. Systems manufactured after these dates are reportedly free from the dangerous defect. To prevent spontaneous Xbox combustion, head to www.xbox.com to learn more about getting a replacement cord. Now if only they could fix those disc-read errors so many folks seem to be getting...

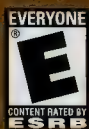
Rumors & Bits

Nintendo is working on a Metroid pinball game for the DS. Guess it makes sense, given that morph-ball ability and all... For the first time since the NES, a game based on the *Dirty Harry* films is in the works. No publisher was announced, and the only available details are that it will be for next-gen systems and that the game will use Clint Eastwood's voice and likeness... Rumors indicate the legendary Lunar series will return on Nintendo DS thanks to Ubisoft... Capcom has announced a Mega Man X collection, which will include the

first six X games and the never-released-in-the-U.S. Mega Man Battle & Chase. They've also announced an arcade classics compilation... Amidst declining profits, Atari has closed its Santa Monica, CA and Beverly, MA studios... Atlus will be bringing the classic puzzler Puyo Pop Fever to the DS in North America... On their Japanese Shining Tears website, Sega quietly revealed that work has begun on another Shining game, currently just called "Shining Project Next." Will this mark a return to the strategy the series is best known for?



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01	Fight Night Round 2 ea / ps2, xb, gc
02	Gran Turismo 4 sony / ps2
03	Star Wars: Republic Commando lucasarts / ps2, xb
04	FIFA Street ea / ps2, xbox, gc
05	NBA Street Vol. 3 ea / ps2, xb, gc
06	Project: Snowblind eidos / ps2, xb, pc
07	Mercenaries lucasarts / ps2, xb, pc
08	Winning Eleven 8 konami / ps2, xb
09	The Getaway: Black Monday sony / ps2
10	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas rockstar / ps2



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Jan. Game Sales

01	Resident Evil 4 capcom / gc
02	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas rockstar / ps2
03	Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap nintendo / gba
04	Mercenaries lucasarts / xbox
05	Mercenaries lucasarts / ps2
06	Need for Speed Underground 2 ea / ps2
07	Madden NFL 2005 ea / ps2
08	Halo 2 microsoft / xb
09	Kingdom Hearts: COM square enix / gba
10	Super Mario 64 DS nintendo / ds



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ea / ps2, xb, gc

This isn't just a boxing game—this is the boxing game that sets the new standard.



Gran Turismo 4
sony / ps2

The best PS2 racer that we will probably ever see is just sitting there, waiting for you to buy it...



FIFA Street
ea / ps2, xb, gc

When regular soccer just doesn't get the job done, you can take it to the streets in the latest variation on EA's franchise.

Staff and reader selections

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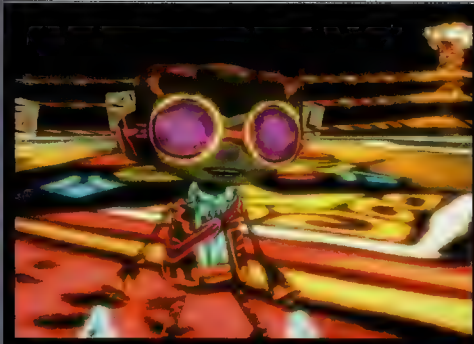
Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	Legend of Zelda nintendo / gc
02	Doom 3 activision / xb
03	Devil May Cry 3 capcom / ps2
04	Final Fantasy XII square enix / ps2
05	Ridge Racer namco / psp



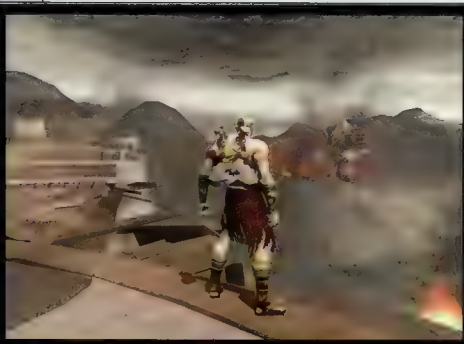
Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	Psychonauts majesco / xb
02	God of War sony / ps2
03	Conker: Live and Reloaded microsoft / xb
04	Devil May Cry 3 capcom / ps2
05	MX vs. ATV Unleashed thq / xb



Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	God of War sony / ps2
02	Doom 3 activision / xb
03	Devil May Cry 3 capcom / ps2
04	Yoshi Touch & Go nintendo / ds
05	Resident Evil 4 capcom / gc



Chris Hoffman senior editor

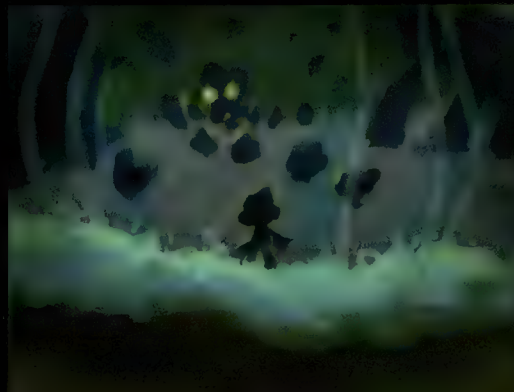
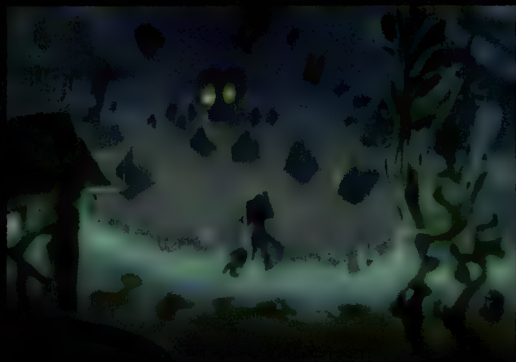
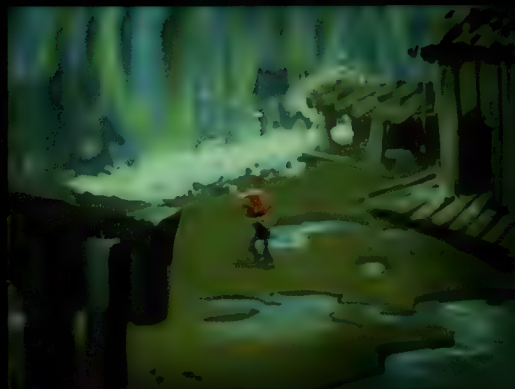
01	WarioWare: Touched! nintendo / ds
02	God of War sony / ps2
03	Tekken 5 namco / ps2
04	SMT: Digital Devil Saga atlus / ps2
05	Capcom Fighting Evolution capcom / xb

Michael Hobbs art director

01	Gran Turismo 4 sony / ps2
02	Yoshi Touch & Go nintendo / ds
03	Resident Evil Outbreak File #2 capcom / ps2
04	Star Fox Assault nintendo / gc
05	Dynasty Warriors koei / psp

Ashley Esqueda associate editor/internet director

01	Star Wars Galaxies: JTL lucasarts / pc
02	Resident Evil 4 capcom / gc
03	Still Life the adventure company / ps2
04	Sid Meier's Pirates! atari / pc
05	Scrapland enlight software / xb





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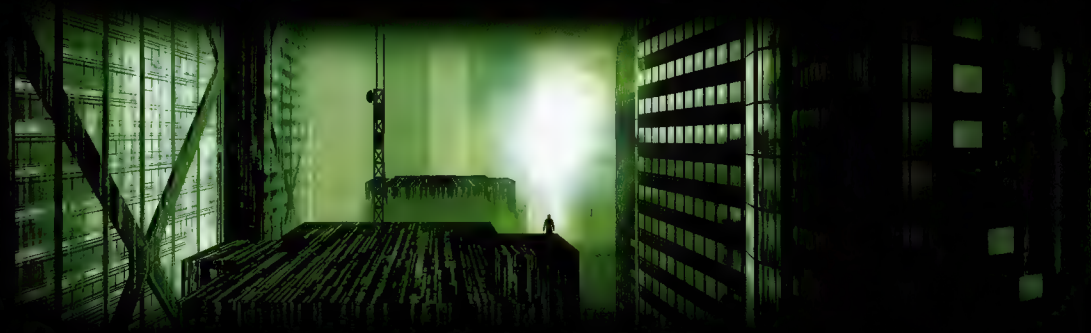
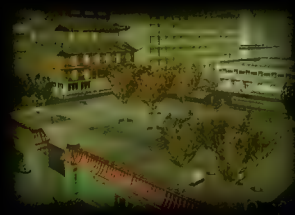
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PSYCHONAUTS

Open your mind

In the psychic age, wars are fought in the mind by paranormal paratroopers called Psychonauts—mental Marines trained to enter the mind and fight the enemies of free thought.

The government facility for training these wunderkinder is camp Whispering Rock, where young psychics are trained in the art of cerebral warfare. Among this year's usual crop of assorted spoon benders, freaks and fire starters, Rasputin, a powerful clairvoyant who's fled the carny life forced on him by his psychic-hating parents, emerges as a top prospect...



Once or twice a decade, Tim Schafer opens his mind, and what spills out is always as groundbreaking as it is genius. His latest, the first from his very own Double Fine studio, looks and smells unlike anything before it, doing for platformers what his past games have for their respective categories: blown the lid clean off. Aside from the fact that it most closely resembles the epic hub-based platforming classics of the '90s, *Psychonauts* is by in large a work of pure imagination... a ride... an experience. You will be better having played it. You will want more. You will likely never get it.

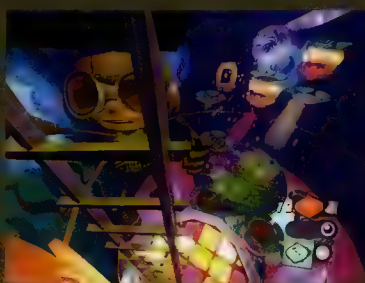
Reaching far, far beyond the confines of tradition—and often sanity—*Psychonauts* offers a cohesive cerebral barrage, darting between the quixotic world of Whispering Rock and the apparition-spiced astral plains Rasputin projects himself into as he attempts to thwart a certain resident maniac's plan for world domination via an army of tanks powered by brains plucked from his fellow

trainees, including Raz's would-be girlfriend, the dark, precocious and altogether flirtatious Lili.

Anchored on slapping portal to head and diving in as a means of progression, the gameplay covers the platforming gamut, albeit in a way you've never seen or imagined it. Trapeze, climbing, floating, rolling, jumping, lock-on shooting, rail-sliding, tightrope walking, melee combat, exploring... It's all inside and all surrounded by sights and sounds that until now have been reserved to either art (Mark Ryden comes to mind) or the likes of Tim Burton. Not to compare Tims, but they do share similar vision and genius, although Schafer is far less constrained given the medium he's chosen to explore. Save it to say, the traditional cliché level design that has helped choke platforming kind (snow, fire, mountain, water—you know the drill) has been replaced by everything from psychedelic dance parties to in-level real-time live theatre amidst the best 3D platforming level design I personally have ever encountered. To say that *Psychonauts* has finally brought the platforming epic out of the kiddie pool (if indeed you considered it wading there)



It's Lucha time! Welcome to Black Velvetopia... Defeat masked wrestlers! Purchase, hang and use living art! Defeat the bull and get a painting to wear on your head! There's never been anything even remotely like it.



"To say that *Psychonauts* has finally brought the platforming epic out of the kiddie pool (if indeed you considered it wading there) would be a gross understatement."

would be a gross understatement. If fighting neon-glazed masked wrestlers on black velvet doesn't grab you, playing Godzilla to a bunch of talking rebel fish will.

Putting all of its ingenious architecture and story aside, for now, what makes any game, especially a platformer, aspire to legendary status (as *Psychonauts* does) are patently unique devices layered on top of exploration and assorted tasks stemming beyond the beaten path (i.e. discovery) into which *Psychonauts* writes its own bylaws in league with the Zeldas of the world. The name of the game in *Psychonauts* being PSI powers. Raz must rank up in order to deal with the challenges posed by the mental world, and so it is here that Double Fine has painted its layers, presenting us

with various ways to assail rank and then exploit our newfound psychic powers. Collecting PSI-Cards, nine along with a PSI-Core purchased from the camp store equals one PSI-marker, good for one rank; 100 Figments—transparent, neon random thoughts scattered among the mental world—count for one rank; or you can poke around the world, digging up scavenger hunt pieces, eight of which will earn you a meaty four ranks. With each 5-10 ranks comes enhanced PSI Power—those wonderful special abilities obtained by earning merit badges for completing various challenges and levels. Throughout the course of the game, Raz will acquire Pyrokinesis, Telekinesis, Invisibility, Marksmanship, Levitation, Shield power, Clairvoyance and

Confusion (of which three can be mapped onto the controller at any given time), each of which is tethered to ingenious gameplay for us to discover. No single element is left without purpose and entertainment value. You could eat off of Double Fine's cutting-room floor.

Should you become disoriented, however, which most ordinary humans inevitably will, Ford Cruller is but a button-press away. Utilizing Raz's handy backpack, where he stores the game's entire gaggle of accoutrements, a slice of bacon summons the camp's crusty über-cadet and resident mastermind (who emanates out of Raz's ear like a massive French horn), whose lab also serves as waypoint for redeeming collected PSI Cards and mental cobwebs (once you purchase the Cobweb Duster). Purchasing items is yet another well-

"A few hours into Psychonauts, you're no longer you; you become Raz."

played device in the game, as searching for arrowheads (the game's source of currency) is akin to a grand Easter egg hunt, traversing the beautiful countryside and its countless nooks, crannies and crazies. Your first order of business should be finding enough arrowheads to buy the Dowsing Rod, which emits a high-pitched tone when Raz is nearby a Deep Arrowhead, worth considerably more. The quicker you buy the Cobweb Duster, the faster you can clean out all those cobwebs and trade 'em in for PSI-Markers to juice the game's PSI-Powers, so get the Dowsing Rod ASAP. Think of it as one massive string of video game dominoes. Everything you do, or don't do, affects something in the game.

Psychonauts' flow is truly extraordinary while entirely rooted in the cerebral: Raz's Thought Bubble (mastered in Milla's disco-tastic Dance Party) is used for the game's masterful bits of rolling and floating; Mental Health replaces traditional energy or hearts; ammo is regenerated via balls of hate from slaying demons and getting medieval on the astral plain; and emotional baggage can be sorted by finding and matching its respective tags. Getting rid of all of the emotional baggage in a given level earns Raz access to primal memories (awesome concept stuff) to go with the View Reels hidden within each mind, revealing the disturbing childhood trauma that's caused the psychosis. These View-Master-like shorts are among my most treasured moments of the game, along with the way in which the characters see Raz when he looks through their eyes via Clairvoyance. A few hours into Psychonauts, you're no longer you; you become Raz.

Perhaps most profoundly of all and key to Psychonauts succeeding beyond the realm of gameplay, it crosses over into the highest echelons of interactive storytelling via the writing, score and vocal performances throughout, which set a new standard. Beyond merely clever and funny, Psychonauts' writing and performances



outsmart, outdo and just plain best the current benchmark altogether, more on the level with film than what we've come to expect from the vast majority of story-driven video games. As much as levels constructed like grand erector sets and living art that we enter through portals into the mind are truly a blessing, to receive them in such a uniquely polished and altogether enthralling package is unheard of, especially among the platforming rank and file. I never wanted this game to end, and it almost didn't. Psychonauts is also long, exceedingly so if you shoot for the highest rank, and deeply rewarding.

When I asked Tim (well, perhaps "begged" is a better word) if he would consider a sequel, he answered by saying: "If I'd done a Full Throttle sequel, there'd have never been a Day of the Tentacle, and if I'd done a Day of the Tentacle sequel, there'd have never been a Grim Fandango..." While I certainly understand his modus operandi, the platforming lover in me silently weeps. I suppose after drying my tears with Conker's puke-soaked tail, I'll begin pondering what Double Fine will do on the next generation of consoles and get over it. Dave Halverson



Fred, a lunatic with a self-induced Napoleon complex, makes way for Waterloo World, a real-time strategy board game where Raz (shown "giant" here) shrinks down to scale to partake in a miniature action-strategy game!

Psychonauts

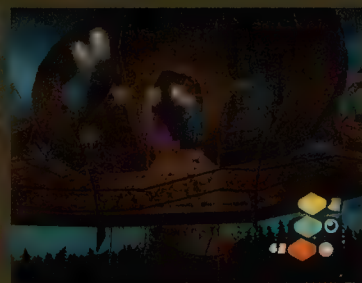
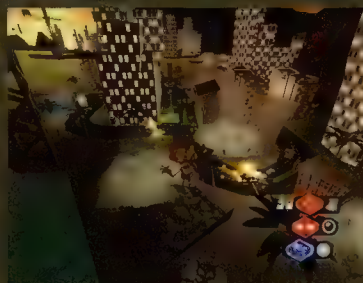
Xbox (reviewed), PlayStation 2, PC

Layer upon layer upon layer of imaginative, innovative gameplay; perfectly suited music and high art.

My one negative point would reveal a spoiler, so it'll have to wait... and, it's not the ending. The ending is awesome.

Developer: Double Fine Productions Publisher: Majesco

Online: None Available: April





The Psychonauts team

Interview

Tim Schafer, creator, Psychonauts
(with Scott Campbell, art director)

play: How did you break into game design? What were you doing prior?

Tim Schafer: I was a computer science major at UC Berkeley, but what I was really interested in was creative writing. I was doing both by the time I graduated (1989) and just happened to see the job posting at LucasFilm Games. They were looking for programmers who could write. What are the odds? Timing is everything! If I hadn't seen that job listing, I would have ended up a database engineer, I think.

What brought you to psychically armed operatives and the world of Psychonauts?

Before Berkeley I was at UC Santa Cruz, where I took a class called the Psychology of Dreams. We read about many different case studies where someone is experiencing a trauma in their real life, and it would manifest in their dreams as a monster or a scary animal. They would transform real-world happenings into these surreal or fantasy images in their heads. And it seemed cool to me to imagine interacting with those surreal images, but having that mean something real. If you go inside someone's head, and you're fighting

a memory that person has of their mean first-grade teacher, then that's more than just a regular fight. We also studied the everyday transformations people make in their dreams. Like people who feel bad about their bodies often dream about fixing up old houses. There was a study of a woman who was depressed, and in her dreams there was this fountain that kept pouring out water that no one was drinking. And it's so cool that someone who's not a poet could create such a poetic symbol in their head without even trying! By going into someone's head, you can express their personalities with a million little symbols like that, and hopefully no one will catch you trying to be symbolic because they're too busy trying to play the game, but they will pick it up on a subconscious level. Also, I stole a lot of stuff from that movie *Dreamscape*.

How about Raz? Did he undergo multiple iterations or did he just pop in there?

Oh, we went through a lot with Raz. You should ask [art director] Scott [Campbell] about that. Originally, he was named Dart, but there were legal problems with that

name. Also, the character design took a long time. I really like how he ended up though. It was worth it. But I'll let Scott give you the details there. Scott Campbell, art director: In the beginning, there was that kid from New Legends of Shaolin. But our kid's name was D'artagnan. Tim's idea was for him to be a tough little kid, very intense, who ran away from his gypsy family in the circus to be a Psychonaut. He was obsessed with the Psychonauts. So we looked at the New Legends kid as that sort of grown-up, intense kid inspiration. Many of the first drawings were kung fu-style with baggy clothes and shaved head with that hair tuft on top and wrapped hands and feet. But many paths were taken... little animal devil boy, mod *Quadrophenia* kid, *Harold and Maude* kid, various hats kid.... until we settled on a big-headed, baggy-clothed gypsy kid with a long stocking cap. We were satisfied. We built him and put him into the game and moved forward with the other characters and gameplay. As time went on, we realized that his body and shape didn't lend itself well to all the acrobatics we wanted him to do. Plus, people weren't reacting amazingly well to

him. As other characters were created, he became less charismatic and less of a lead character. Then we focus-grouped him. This sucked in a valuable way. People weren't into him and thought he was a girl because of the long stocking cap. Also, we discovered we couldn't use the name D'artagnan because it had already been used in a different game. So...back to the drawing board. We tried another approach to making him more limber-looking. We also wanted him to look like he idolized the famous Psychonaut Sasha Nein, a James Bond/scientific sort of character. So we dressed him like Sasha in a little suit with a striped shirt and nice shoes. [We] combined this with this helmet and goggles that looked awesome on a few drawings and Raz was born. And then we all got happy.

Thank you, Scott! I'm happy too. Okay, Tim, Do you prepare somewhat of a screenplay before embarking on a game this story driven?

Tim Schafer: I fill up a paper notebook with a kind of stream-of-conscious gibberish mostly. It's important to get all the thoughts out of your head and onto paper. It's also important for me to do that every day, because otherwise it's so easy to get out of the habit of moving forward with your creative ideas. Then I use a lot of screenplay-like ideas to organize those thoughts. I think about the three-act structure. Where are the major plot points? Where does the whole thing turn around and head off in a new direction? I think a lot about the protagonist and the antagonist and the relationship they have and steps the hero has to go through and how to pace out their ups and downs, so it's kind of a rollercoaster with a big climax at the end. I make some very exciting charts that have a lot of ovals and arrows and sometimes big Xs, and then usually end in a lot of question marks.

Great dialogue and voice acting...

We only use in-house talent for the scratch dialog, while we're making the game. But for the final product, we use very experienced pros. There is no replacement for a good actor. We cast from all over, but most of the voice talent is down in LA, so we fly down there to record it all. Our voice producer, Khris Brown, handles the casting, the unions, the recording and editing. Then it took a whole team of internal people to organize and process all 8,000 lines and get them working in the game. Our star, Richard Horwitz, did the voice for *Invader Zim*. And we're also working with Nick Jameson, who has a million different voices and been in many LucasArts titles over the years. All of the actors are really fun to work with in the studio. They're really energetic and creative. Some day I'd like to start a game design by working with the actors, make them the first step in the creative process instead of one of the last. Some day! When we were pitching to new publishers this year, we almost signed with one big name publisher, but one of the things they wanted to do was replace our actors with celebrities. Not because they didn't like the acting we had—they loved it—but



because they wanted the names attached for marketing reasons. We didn't sign with them.

How dare you have integrity in this business... What's the overall process like at Double Fine? Do you go heavy design doc or just do lots of R&D and then dive in and build as you go?

I do what I think is a complete design doc in the beginning. But we always need much more. I try to keep it current for about half the project. But then the design splits up into several different level design docs, collectible design docs, scripts, rambling email threads and white boards around the office that say "DO NOT ERASE" on them. Next time it's going to be super-organized on the intranet with a comprehensive wiki page. I swear.

But definitely, I find it's hard to design on paper past a certain part. You really have to experience something in play to really inform your design decisions. Sometimes you have to just throw the thing up on the wall and see if it sticks. You have to put it in the game and let everybody play it for a while before you know if you've made things better or worse. And hopefully if it's bad, that's not in one of the builds you send to the publisher. And if you do, hopefully they understand that it's a work in progress.

Psychonauts is quite a departure for you. Is your aim to lift hub-based platforming out of the kiddie pool for the hundreds of thousands (present company included) weaned on them who crave more than odd little boys and mutated animals?

I really just wanted to make a game that I would like. I love Zelda and Mario, and I wanted to make a whole world like that. There is a crazy, happy place I get into when I'm in the basement of Princess Toadstool's castle that I can't explain. So



"...I'd like to start a game design by working with the actors, make them the first step in the creative process instead of one of the last."

Tim Schafer, creator, Psychonauts

Dr. Lobow: And you thought your HMO was bad.



I wanted to make a real place that people could live in. There is a directed path through Psychonauts, but also a lot of side paths and optional content and just places to hang out! I wanted to make a little fantasy world that felt real, but also one that had a sense of humor and drama that I could relate to more as an adult.

...I showed my merit badge to everyone! Why on Earth did Microsoft balk after all this time? We now know them from the trail of dead...

They had a big change of leadership and direction there. And the new regime told us they couldn't support any Xbox 1 games coming out in 2005. At the time, we were scheduled for February 2005. So maybe if we had cut three levels we could have made it out in time. But I'm really glad how things worked out. It was nerve-racking making the switch, but Majesco has been a truly supportive partner in making this game, and I'm glad we met them!

How on Earth is Budcat going to shoehorn this game into the PS2, and do you think it wise after seeing what happened to the likes of Vexx and Sonic Heroes? Aren't some games better off as Xbox exclusive? I mean, Fable is coming up on a million sales. Are you worried that a poor showing on PS2 (which will garner the most attention) will tarnish the game?

They are some really sharp dudes down in Vegas who have been through this many times over. None of the parties involved—Double Fine, Budcat or Majesco—would be willing to let out a substandard PS2 game. It's definitely a challenge, and very

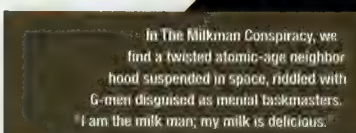
time-consuming. But we are putting a lot of energy into it and it will be worth it when it's done.

Have they been working with you on where to cut? Obviously, normal mapping is out...and long load times in. What else might the PS2 negate? That water won't be the same...

There are tricks for everything! We did try to take advantage of the Xbox hardware as much as possible, but there is always another way to do stuff. The PS2 is a very powerful machine. You just have to understand it, and the Budcat guys know it inside and out. You can't just take an Xbox game, slice all the textures in half, take out the normal maps and call it a PS2 game. You have to carve a new path from the content to the screen, and reinvent a lot. You have to see it as its own product and make decisions that are right just for that version. For a lot of people, that's the only Psychonauts they're going to see, so it has to be perfect!

If anyone states they wish Psychonauts was laid out like GTA, do we have permission to schedule a lobotomy?

But it is laid out just like GTA 3. You can totally drive around and kill hookers and steal money. Except for the hookers have all been replaced with squirrels, and instead of driving, you are rolling around on a psychic thought balloon, and instead of stealing money you're digging up arrowheads. Oh, and I should probably mention that you can't have sex with the squirrels. Gotta save something for the sequel, you know!



In The Milkman Conspiracy, we find a twisted atomic-age neighborhood suspended in space, riddled with G-men disguised as mental taskmasters. "I am the milk man; my milk is delicious."

Budcat on Psychonauts PS2

Interview

Jonah Stitch, managing partner, Budcat

play: Porting Psychonauts to PS2, will you be able to mimic elements like the normal mapping and water effects?

Jonah Stitch: There are some graphical effects used on the Xbox that cannot be exactly recreated on the PS2. Wherever possible, Budcat has attempted to implement PS2-specific alternatives to these effects. We haven't always been able to achieve the same degree of graphical "flash," but in most instances, we've been able to implement a similar level of visual quality using simpler effects tailored to the PS2 hardware.

Will the game experience longer load times, or is there a way around that as well?

The level load times on PS2 will be very comparable to those on the Xbox, perhaps a few seconds longer in some instances.

I suppose the broader question is: will the PS2 version be in any way different, or pretty much a carbon copy?

The goal of everyone involved in the product—Double Fine, Majesco and Budcat—has been to make the two products as close as possible. There are some technical differences between the platforms that will result in the PS2 version looking slightly different, particularly when compared side-by-side with the Xbox. Most importantly, however, there will be no differences in the gameplay and player experience between the two versions. Every aspect of Tim Schafer's original vision has been implemented on the PS2 exactly as it is on Xbox. **play**





"I should probably mention that you can't have sex with the squirrels. Gotta save something for the sequel, you know!"

Tim Schafer, creator, *Psychonauts*

The Next Generation

What we know so far, and what it means

No event in gaming culture is bigger than the introduction of new console hardware. With every transition, we have come to expect vastly increased speed and memory, as well as visuals and sound that are several times more complex. And we're always reminded that game design itself will experience a paradigm shift under the auspice of powerful new hardware, and sure enough, never-before-seen concepts are birthed and fostered as a direct result of evolved electronics.

As Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo prepare their forthcoming console successors, all of these traditional next-generation precepts will once again come into play, but is there something markedly different about this particular console transition? Let's take a look.

words: Mike Griffin

Sony PlayStation 3 (PS3)

Point of Interest

The PS3's Cell processor may interact with Sony's current or future portable gaming hardware, accepting the brunt of complex processing tasks then transmitting the results wirelessly to a game in progress on the portable.

Standout Features:

Blu-ray disc, Cell processor, nVidia GPU

The PS3 will use Sony's Blu-ray Disc (BD) format for games and media. A single-layer BD can hold 25 gigabytes, compared to a single-layer DVD's 4.7 gigabyte capacity, and it transfers data about five times faster. With heavy hitters like EA, Vivendi Universal, Disney, Pioneer, Samsung, JVC and Philips supporting this format, industry analysts predict that Blu-ray may eventually replace DVD. This would leave the PS3 in a most enviable position, as it is currently the only next-gen system using the BD format.

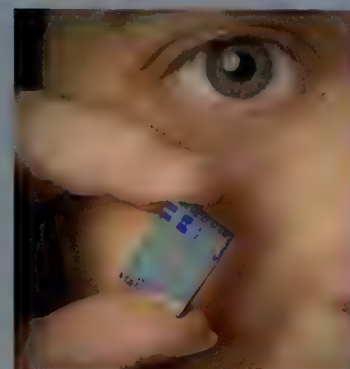
The Cell Processor was co-developed by Sony, Toshiba and IBM, and it will be at the heart of the PS3. The Cell is an incredible marvel of engineering, but it may prove to be difficult to program. Running at speeds over 4GHz (that's about a dozen times faster than the PS2), the chip will have a 64-bit PowerPC core and eight additional synergistic 32-bit

vector processors all connected across a wide, lightning-fast data bus. In theory, programmers should be able to code specific threads that control exactly how they want elements of a game to use each of the synergistic cores—for physics, network code, sound triggers, etc., and the 64-bit core will parcel that data and keep it moving around the Cell and through the PS3's system memory.

Valve (Half-Life 2) CEO Gabe Newell explains why multi-thread programming—likely required for all three next-gen systems—won't be a quick and easy process: "Thread-level parallelism is going to be the primary method for increasing performance going forward. The problem with this is that no one has written code in this multi-threaded fashion for games. It has always been much easier to improve your performance by looking at your single-threaded code and making it go faster than to try to write a multi-threaded game engine. If single-threaded CPU code is X work, and GPU code is $2X$ work, then multi-threaded code is $10X$. Every line of code you write can do horrible things to the behavior of the system, and no one has ever actually figured out how to do it (you may work really, really hard and run really slow anyhow). 64-bit code, by comparison, is easy. It's a one-time hit and then you just program the way you've always programmed. However long it takes for 64-bit game code to appear, it will take five times as long for good multi-threaded code to appear."

PS3 visuals will employ an all-new nVidia GPU. This is an interesting reversal of alliances, as nVidia supplied the graphics chip for the original Xbox. nVidia has assigned roughly 50 engineers to complete the PS3 implementation of their next-generation graphics hardware

before year's end, and the chip is expected to run at a core speed of at least 600MHz. The question of what API (application programming interface) the hardware will use is still up in the air, but according to nVidia's recent statements, the PS3's GPU has "...nothing to do with Windows, it doesn't use any of the Windows features, and it's not about driving Windows. It's not about the PC at all." So that pretty much rules out Direct X 9 or 10. Sony may opt for OpenGL or another similar open standard, or they may be developing a custom API internally to get the most from the nVidia GPU and Cell combo.



The Cell chip: a bit-sized super-computer.

Nintendo Revolution

Point of Interest

Nintendo has acknowledged that its online direction with the Gamecube should have been better, given the success the competition has enjoyed in the sector. They are developing a strong online strategy for Revolution and will use the DS' wireless online functionality to test various infrastructure concepts over the course of 2005.

Standout Features:

Gyroscopic motion-sensitive controller, first-party titles

If Nintendo president Satoru Iwata gives the go-ahead to reveal Revolution hardware at this year's E3, we'll probably be getting to grips with one of the most

fascinating forms of control in gaming history. Nobody knows exactly how Nintendo is going to implement a type of motion-sensitive gyroscopic technology in a contemporary game controller, but after the DS, there's little doubt that Nintendo can pull off another impressive hardware design. One intriguing element of this type of gyroscopic implementation is that it can replace the movement of the digital pad or analog stick with motion-sensing input—allowing for a near-limitless range of movement.

Though far from shocking, new Mario and Zelda titles slated for Revolution are apparently through the planning stages and well underway on prototype development hardware. Nintendo's legendary first-party titles have always been a staple of their hardware introductions and it certainly warms our hearts to see franchise traditions will continue in 2006. Imagine a really huge Mario adventure with near-CG quality graphics, and gameplay built around gyroscopic platforming action.

Microsoft Next-Generation Xbox (Xbox II/Xenon/Xbox Next)

Point of Interest

Sources hint that Microsoft may be shipping the basic Xbox II model sans hard drive. The Xbox HD has been a high-cost, low-use, hacking liability for the most part—and Microsoft has been quietly offloading storage to remote avenues like Xbox Live and Media Center PCs. With MS contracting M-System last year to design high-density removable memory modules, all evidence suggests the “streamlined” Xbox II design will be HD-free. A removable high capacity drive seems more likely.

Standout Features:

Multi-core PowerPC CPU, ATI GPU, Windows PC connectivity

The Xbox II CPU will likely use IBM's 64-bit PowerPC processor with multiple cores operating at over 3GHz. This potent configuration is similar to the dual PowerPC core inside Apple's high-end workstation Mac G5, but the Xbox II solution should receive additional hardware threads in each of its cores. Also of note: Microsoft requested that advanced security and anti-piracy measures be built directly into the CPU core.

Though clock frequency and memory specifics are mired in wild speculation

at this point, we do know that the ATI GPU powering Xbox II will use a new version of Shader Model 3.0 and a custom Direct X 9+ interface. Besides wholesale improvements to image quality, a couple of specific features will have a meaningful impact on next-gen games: advanced displacement mapping and geometry instancing. Unlike the bump mapping illusion of height and depth on flat surfaces, proper displacement mapping in SM 3.0 will add actual surface detail by altering the height of the texture itself. This means real bumps that can cast shadows, reflect light and occlude other objects—with no performance hit. Geometry instancing is performing another kind of magic in next-gen games. Todd Howard of Bethesda explains how their next-gen title *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* is benefiting: “Say you wanted to create a forest (something we’re doing in *Oblivion*). With current tech, you’re pretty limited to how you’re going to do that using a 3D mesh in the foreground and sprites in the distance. With the next gen, we have finally gone crazy: the trees generate themselves, instancing millions of leaves and grass, fully animated, the works. The processing power in the next gen just allows you to have the hardware do a lot more of the generation and rendering of things than ever before.”

Another sure bet regarding Microsoft's Xbox II plans involves a much tighter focus on Windows PC connectivity. In addition to the continuing XNA development program, MS is going into the next generation with a plan to increase integration between Xbox Live, instant messengers and mobile

devices so members across its network can stay in touch without being bound to a specific medium. Xbox II will also have a deeper implementation of the “Extender” connection to Windows Media

Center PCs, adding more audio and video content options. We also won't rule out the possibility of wireless Xbox II peripherals with full Windows compatibility and eventually a hybrid Xbox II/PC all-in-one.

Instancing allows next-gen graphics hardware to call up enormous quantities of similar objects, like trees and grass, with minimal system overhead.



Xbox II: First to developers = first to market?

There's a good reason why analysts are anticipating a 2005 release for Xbox II and a host of titles: it's the most predictable next-gen platform to develop on. With only minor programming discrepancies between a high-end Dx9 PC and Xbox II, many teams could have started a project in late 2003 using common production tools, completing a full 18-month development cycle just in time for the system's deployment.

Games like *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* will boast unprecedented model and scene complexity.



The Coming Storm

We're seeing that Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo have different priorities. Sony will probably use the Cell's “system on a chip” design to network with other electronics. Microsoft will narrow the divide between it and the Windows PC, while Nintendo will introduce a dramatic and innovative way to interact and feel motion. Next-generation game development will have a very steep learning curve and require massive financial resources (R&D is going to skyrocket), so perhaps we'll see more platform exclusives that show the power of a given console. Though giants like EA (*Battlefield 2*) will continue to cross-pollinate, smaller developers are going to have a difficult time keeping pace. One direction is certain: all three console makers have an extensive next-generation online plan designed to saturate the mainstream and bring global gaming communities together—something that could fuel tremendous growth in the industry. It's all very exciting stuff, and we'll probably be powering-up at least one new console before year's end.

Haunting Ground

A newly intriguing look at survival horror

As *Haunting Ground* opens, you find yourself wandering the garden entrance of a castle, no clue as to your whereabouts. Grand windows invite you to peek inside: "I wonder what kind of room is on the other side? I can see the light flicker from candles inside, but it's too dark to see anything else." Once you pass through the foyer, you come across many magnificent sights, room after room filled with elegance and mystery. You are drawn to investigate it all: "The fire burns, emitting a red glow. The room is a comfortable temperature." Casual descriptors continue to inform the somber mood, and you begin to discover a place creepily dominated by the art of alchemy.

Your role for this psychologically spun journey is the 18-year-old Fiona, who awakens in a dungeon cage following a tragic car accident. Her captor, carving the flesh off a bloody carcass, becomes distracted by a white German shepherd, allowing her to escape into the further prison of the castle walls. The dog, named

Hermie, will eventually become a friend, aiding the feeble girl in her attempts to find freedom. Initially, the hesitant animal takes ample coaxing, but as the pair's friendship grows, they become inseparable.

Debilatas, an ogre of a man who seems obscenely obsessed with Fiona, not to mention is completely deranged, is somehow intimately linked to the castle. He walks with a slow gait and is almost immobile in his elephantine stature, but that's not about to stop him from stalking Fiona as she searches for escape, locating keys and solving obscure riddles. Limited in her ability to take on such an opponent, Fiona must crouch in the shadows and find any available object to hide under, waiting out his approach as he disgustingly sniffs for her scent. Other beings also lurk in the halls, some spirit-like in nature, which resemble glowing spheres of blue light and call out Fiona's location.

In an early creepy scene, Fiona meets up with the resident maid, who blankly stares her down with that soulless chill the

Japanese are so good at invoking in their horror creations. The emotion is palpable, and as you get a good look at Fiona for the first time, your reaction may be as mine: we're on the verge of truly establishing beauty and ineffable connection with our characters. As Fiona strips her makeshift sheet cover to accept the proper clothes the maid has laid on the bed, Debilatas is seen hiding, watching her dress. *Haunting Ground* is entering into chilling new territory.

Brady Fiechter

The *Haunting Ground* team
wrote Fiona's journey
and the residents
inhabited by the castle.

Haunting Ground

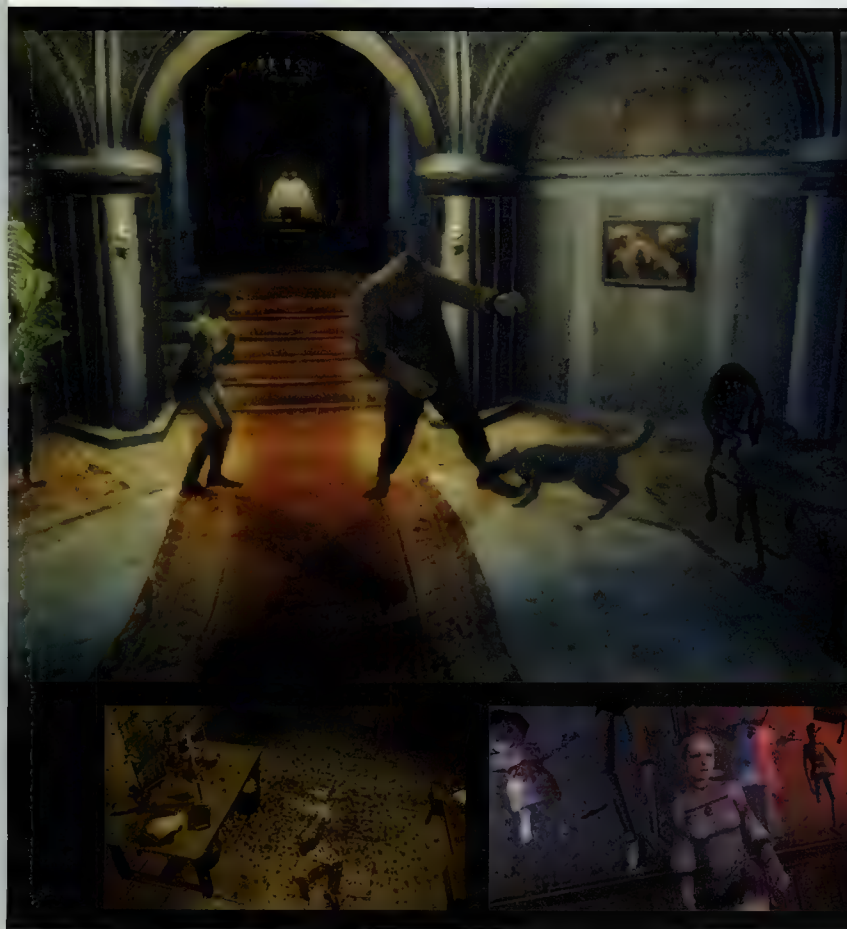
PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

The cinematics are directed by Naoto Takenaka, a well-known Japanese director and actor.

Developer: Capcom Publisher: Capcom

Online: None Available: None





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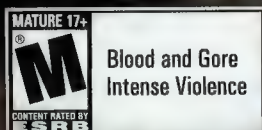


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PlayStation 2



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Fantastic Four

The power of Four



"...they've come a very long way since Legion, as Fantastic Four is looking quite great."

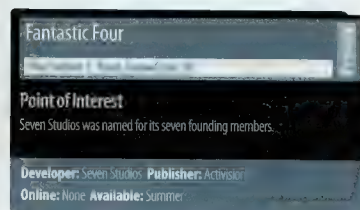
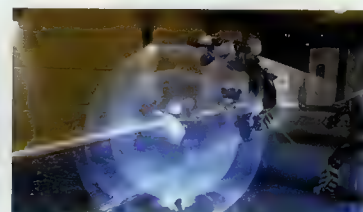
The Commish goes ape-shit as Thing.

Not so long ago, in a galaxy not so far away, a company by the name of Seven Studios (named for its seven founding members) was created by ex-Virgin/Westwood alumni Eric Yeo. The plan was to capitalize on his knowledge of turn-based strategy as the driving force behind the Command and Conquer series and bring about a console-based action-strategy game like no other. That game was Midway's Legion: Legend of Excalibur, and did it ever reek. Eric would go on to accomplish great things elsewhere, while Seven Studios, whom I thought defunct, has popped up again, this time attached to yet another potentially huge title. By the looks of it, they've come a

very long way since Legion, as Fantastic Four is looking quite great. Following in the multi-hero footsteps of the upcoming film, as expected, players will assume the guises of the foursome—Mr. Fantastic, who can stretch, squeeze and use his brain power to heal, hack computers and override security; Invisible Girl, called upon whenever stealth, ninja speed or telekinetic powers are needed; Human Torch, who can manipulate fire in multiple ways; or Thing, who basically either smashes or obliterates anything in his path—and become locked in mortal combat with Doctor Doom in locations pulled directly from the film. While the game does mimic the movie's locations, it's based on an

original story penned by X2: X-Men United scribe Zak Penn (makes me wish I was named Dave Controlpad) with missions and environmental factors unique to the game. Two-player co-op and head-to-head arena battles will be offered as well. Sounds pretty fantastic, eh?

Dave Halverson



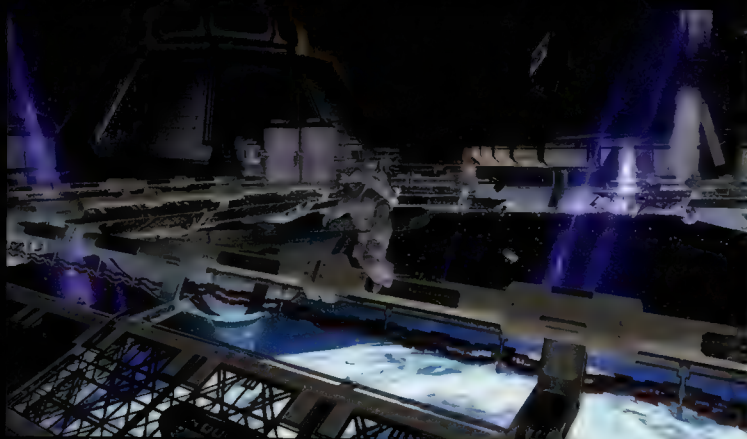
Fantastic Four

Point of Interest

Seven Studios was named for its seven founding members.

Developer: Seven Studios Publisher: Activision

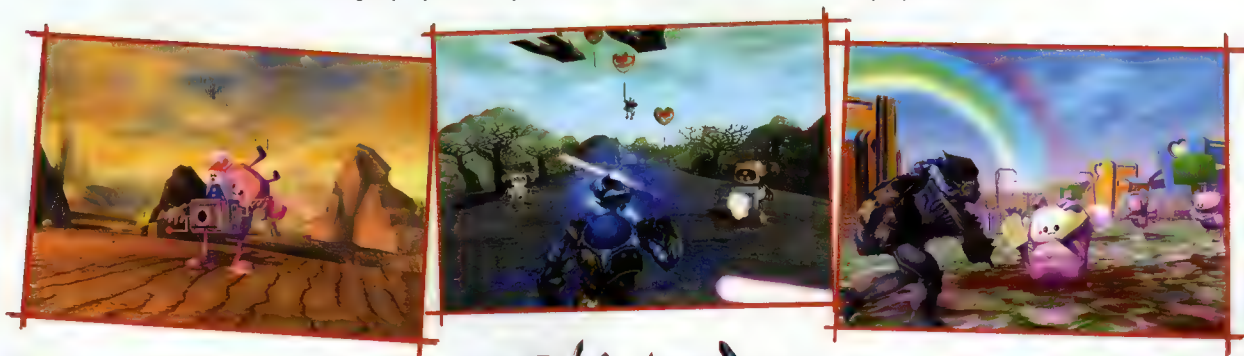
Online: None Available: Summer





TRUST US, HE HAD IT COMING.

Introducing Raze's Hell. Play as Raze, whose land has been overrun by Kewletts – evil cuties trying to impose their crazed views upon the masses. Utilize your intense hatred for all things cute and an overwhelming arsenal to ensure that the streets flow with the blood of the vile Kewletts. Includes single-player, co-op mode and killer Xbox Live™ multi-player modes.



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The Suffering

Ties That Bind

Destroy the monster, or become one yourself?

A darkest evil breeds in us all. Some of us simply allow it out in its darkest hour. The moment of reckoning for Torque came when his wife and daughter were slaughtered by a man who goes by the name of Blackmore. Torque would respond with a bloody killing spree of his own.

In this sequel to the unflinchingly brutal *The Suffering*, you leave the prison walls to hunt the filthy streets of a fictionalized Baltimore, where the mystic puppeteer Blackmore continues to spill forth his bizarre manifestations. Building off the first game's morality system, choices of consequence present themselves along the march of death: descend into the depths of pure evil, or show a desire for redemption.

The Suffering: Ties That Bind is searching to give you more freedom this time out, setting up multiple paths of exploration and various outcomes to your choices. As Torque becomes enraged, his powers and weapons will be dictated by the morality line you choose to walk. As an action-horror effort, the developers emphasize that the game is clearly on the side of action, now even more so, with a tighter inventory and three new weapon classes complementing the added dual-weapons arsenal.

Standing at the center of the vile mood and unapologetically violent imagery are the disturbing creatures that stalk the streets. One of the first game's most original ideas was the enemy theme—resurrected death row victims, marked by an exaggerated horror of their execution. This sequel continues similarly with this



effectively creative approach, depicting urban decay and the anguish of those caught in their personal hells. You'll be stalked by the likes of *The Mainliner*, who looks like a human pincushion of junkie needles, which he plucks from his malformed body as a weapon. *The Suffering: Ties That Bind* is intent on not shying away from the extreme side of the macabre. Brady Flechter

"You'll be stalked by the likes of *The Mainliner*, who looks like a human pincushion of junkie needles..."

The Suffering: Ties That Bind

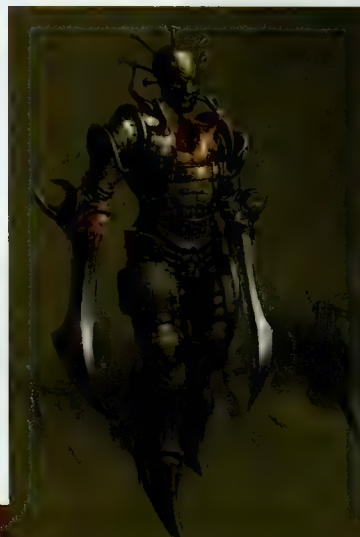
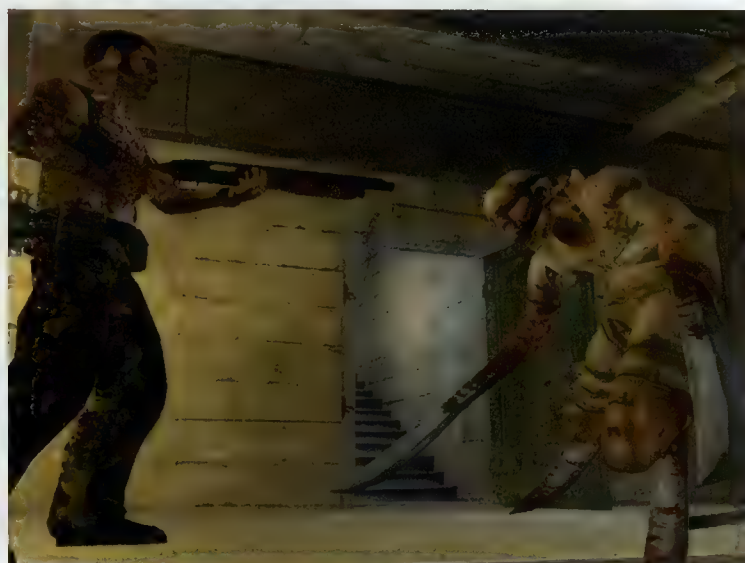
PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Point of Interest

Star Winston Studios designed the creatures in the original game.

Developer: Surreal Publisher: Midway

Online: None Available: Summer

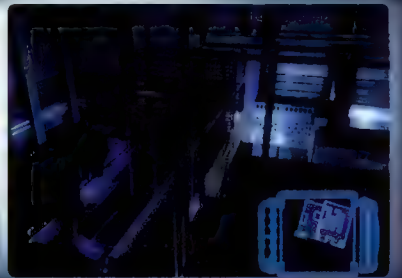
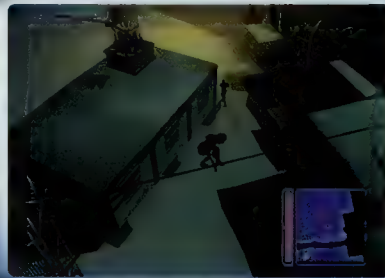
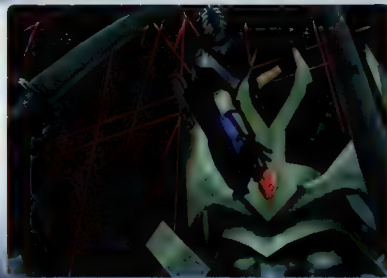


The creature design is dark and grisly.

STOLEN

THEY SAID IT COULDN'T BE DONE.

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COMING SOON...



Blood
Violence



PlayStation 2



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Arc the Lad

End of Darkness

This lad has some new tricks up his sleeve



Arc the Lad: End of Darkness takes players back to a world where magic meets technology, where airships soar through the sky, where creatures like Deimos and Slothians share the land with humans, and where that unforgettable, rousing theme song from one of the PS1's most classic strategy-RPGs echoes in one's ears. Set five years after Kharg, Darc and company helped save the world in Twilight of the Spirits, this new Arc title mixes a lot of familiarity with elements never before attempted in the series.

In the starring role this time around is Edda, a young man living on a peace-loving, isolated island who knows little of the outside world. Though inexperienced, as a descendant of exorcist heritage, Edda is destined for greatness—a prophecy which proves true through a chain of events that involve him encountering a mysterious girl named Kirika, rescuing her from a supposedly invincible monster called the Darmyst and absorbing the creature's power into himself. His destiny prompts him to leave his village behind, accompanied by

his Slothian friend Hemo, and embark on a journey that takes him to famous Arc locales like Dilzweld, Millmana and Peisus (that's Millmana and Paysus to any Arc Collection fans) among other places.

Many other recognizable Arc elements are found here as well, including the Hunter's Guild—Edda quickly becomes a member—which is the game's main means of progression, much as it was in Arc III. Also making their return from that game are the synthesis and Cardishing techniques, which have now been merged into one discipline, as cards are used to power Edda's ALD—a bracer-like Hunter tool that permits the use of added powers. By finding or synthesizing cards, players can customize their heroes by boosting stats with weapon or armor cards, or give them new abilities, such as firing flaming arrows or casting magic whirlwinds. Better yet, Character Cards can be utilized, allowing the player to go into battle as legendary heroes from the past, including Arc, Iga, Tosh, Elc, Kukuru, Shu, Alec and many more.

Despite this familiarity, much has

Note the real-time combat completely grid-free.

"...this new Arc title mixes a lot of familiarity with elements never before attempted in the series."



changed in the Arc world, not the least of which is the battle system. The strategic, turn-based combat of the past has been replaced by real-time fighting, as players pummel enemies into submission with melee attack combos or any of their ALD powers (which are accessed by holding R2 and pressing the corresponding ability button). Perhaps even more significant is the addition of online gameplay. Up to four players can fight together to complete their missions cooperatively, or even take on another team of four for some friendly Hunter competition. Whether you go it alone or opt to head online, seeing how the adventure unfolds from here promises to be interesting.

Chris Hoffman

Arc the Lad: End of Darkness

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

The Japanese title of this game is Arc the Lad Generation. Technically, it's the seventh Arc game.

Developers: Cattle Call Publisher: Namco

Online: 4p co-op/8p versus Available: May

RED NINJA

END OF HONOR™

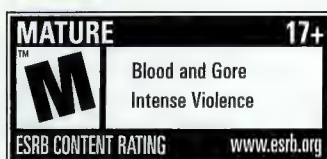


WIRED FOR VENGEANCE

Witness to the brutal murder of her father, then hung by a wire and left for dead, Kurenai swears vengeance on the ruthless Black Lizard Clan. Play as Kurenai and embark on a quest for revenge in an original story by film director Shinsuke Sato.

- Slash, impale, decapitate, and pummel enemies with the Tetsugen, a deadly wire weapon.
- Choose blowguns, smoke bombs, explosives or knives to annihilate your prey.
- Utilize the environment and your Ninjutsu powers to go undetected and sneak up on your enemies.

MARCH 2005



PlayStation®2



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Taking stealth gameplay to the next unforgiving level

For you nitpickers who complained that *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* wasn't a true sequel—yeah, I know, how awful to force fans to play another opportunistic *Splinter Cell* within the same year—Sam Fisher's properly back in undeniably top form. This time he's out to disarm a boiling arms threat from China and North Korea, who have decided it's in their best interest to kidnap American officials.

Bad for the world, good for Sam's special-ops business opportunities, which in *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* are mostly similar to what you've come to expect from the series: The enemy threat scurries around dusky modern-world military facilities, and you have to quietly

"Scenarios provide several options...with a newly structured emphasis on player freedom."

sneak past to further your mission goals. A few new gadgets are thrown into the mix—the E-beam is a cool addition that knocks out electrical sources—and Sam is a more mobile, deadlier force with such skills as switching guns to the opposite hand and suspending for a swift snap of a passerby's neck. If you prefer sparing life and a drive for a more surreptitious approach, avoiding confrontation at all costs is entirely up to you. Scenarios provide several options for completion, with a newly structured emphasis on player freedom.

Chaos Theory is an enormous technical achievement, elevating what was already a visually arresting space in *Pandora Tomorrow* with more advanced animations, lighting and texturing. The dimension to the game, the way light plays off surfaces and carves out shadows, engages in a rare manner. But what really sells the immersion of the world is the interaction with all the visual intricacies, especially the light sources—popping a lightbulb to throw off a guard in the darkness is more than just engaging technique; it looks awesome in the stark contrast it provides to the atmosphere. Expert use of sound—a sonic meter actually detects nearby harmonics,



Sam's world looks even better than before, thanks to more animation and physics.



which you can skillfully sync with to avoid detection—completes *Chaos Theory's* impact.

Online has become a huge part of *Splinter Cell's* appeal, and this latest ups the ante. Spies versus Mercenaries is back, adding more maps and inventory to the mix. The co-op angle is also going deeper, forcing you to really use the aid of your ally to complete the various missions, which are drawn from the single-player

scenarios. The real sequel to *Splinter Cell* has indeed arrived. Brady Flechter

Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC

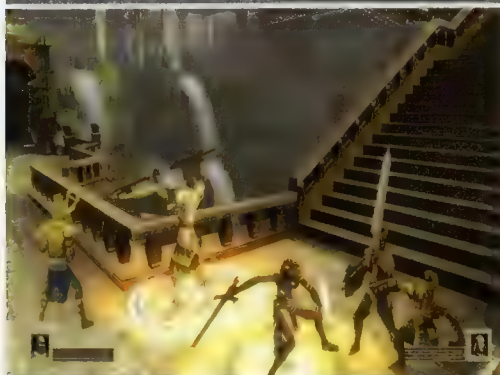
Point of Interest

The engine actually employs proprietary Ubisoft technology that frees the CPU in unique ways.

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal Publisher: Ubisoft

Online: 4p co-op/versus Available: March

Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows



Gauntlet is getting an aggressive modern update. Gone are the top-down dungeon-crawling maps and hack-slash-hack-slash progression. The heart is here and an ease of play is still the idea, but the designers—which includes Doom's John Romero—are going for a denser mode of adventure and action, leaving the depth to be explored if that's your thing. There's a more serious edge this time out, and with that comes some role-playing elements. Of course, following tradition, you can team up on your journey, and for the first time in a Gauntlet game, online play is fully supported. *Brady Fiechter*

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Midway
Publisher: Midway
Available: Summer



Stolen



Anya's a thief, but she's not a killer. In this shadowy stealth adventure, the steely heroine relies on her gadgets and cunning over brute force. One of the more valuable tools in the game is the dart gun, which can be loaded up with a variety of devices. Instead of being guided by an omnipresent radar, you'll get to shoot tracking darts into unsuspecting guards to bring up the typical cone of vision. Anya's also much more acrobatic than the usual male stealth lead, darting across rooftops, scaling walls and hanging off wires, which takes the level design into some interesting territory. *Brady Fiechter*

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Blue 52
Publisher: Hip Games
Available: November

Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks



Coming off the well-received Mortal Kombat: Deception, Midway has decided to move the murderous gang into action-adventure. Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks contains all the cues and characters you'd expect from the franchise, including the continued focus on bloody cartoon violence. The setup is heavily action-oriented, with Kung Lao taking the lead as he calls on stripped-down signature moves to cut through waves of enemy opposition. Environmental interaction is carrying over from Deception, where you can inflict random acts of cruelty at nearly every turn. *Brady Fiechter*

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Midway
Publisher: Midway
Available: Summer

Samurai Western



I've been playing the import version of SW, thinking what a shame it is that it wasn't slated for release here—so this is good news. And not only is Atlus bringing it over, but they're fixing the few areas of gameplay that need tweaking. The latest from Spike, creators of the original Tenchu, SW is a highly stylized 1800s Western action game that stars an unlikely hero: Gojiro Kiryu, sort of a cross between Grasshopper and Spike Spiegel. Using his Bushido Sense, insane speed and otherworldly blade skills—so fast he can deflect bullets—mass slaughter (of those who have it coming) with a distinct manga-meets-Red Dead flavor is pretty much the name of the game. This is not your everyday action game. *Dave Halverson*

System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** Spike
Publisher: Atlus **Available:** June



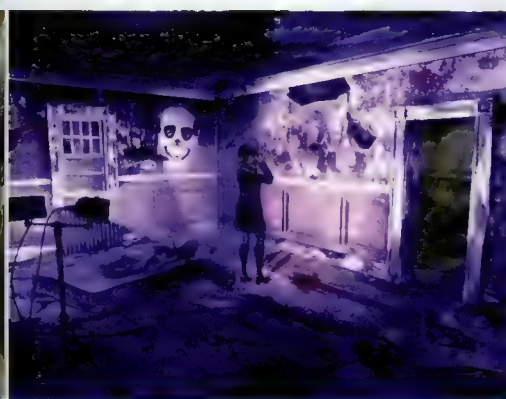
Preview Gallery

Still Life



In *Still Life*, you control Victoria McPherson, a detective trying to profile a serial killer on the loose in modern-day Chicago. You also control Gus McPherson (whom some might remember from *Post Mortem*) in 1920s Prague, also investigating a series of killings, both of which are eerily similar. A point-and-click mystery, the game is shaping up to be absolutely gripping, promising to spill over into real life by continuing the mystery on the Internet through various puzzles and real-looking websites. With stunning preset backdrops (a la *Syberia*), creepy background music and stellar voice acting (not to mention some really tough puzzles), *Still Life* looks like a serious contender. A. Esqueda

System: Xbox, PC **Developer:** Microïds
Publisher: The Adventure Company **Available:** 2005



Lego Star Wars: The Video Game



A long time ago, in a galaxy not so far away, George Lucas kept a pretty tight lid on his beloved *Star Wars* license. But that is no longer the case, opening the doors for games like *Lego Star Wars*, a comedic, SD-inspired take on Episodes I, II and III, where characters are shaped like Lego men and starships are built from construction blocks. The premise couldn't be more goofy, but tons of playable characters are included, and the ability to use the force to manipulate blocks in the environments is kind of cool. The game should provide fun for the tykes it's aimed at, especially in co-op mode. Chris Hoffman

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Traveller's Tales
Publisher: Eidos
Available: April

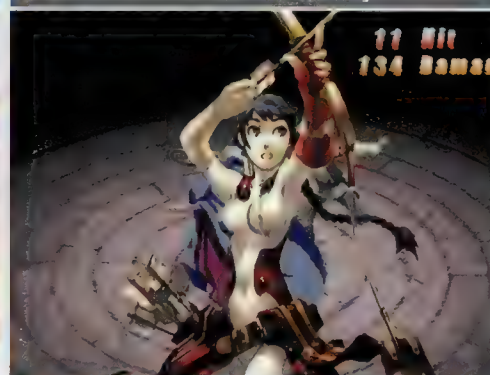
Capcom Fighting Evolution



Trailing a few months behind its underrated PS2 sibling, *Capcom Fighting Evolution* makes its way onto Xbox with the new addition of online gameplay. Other than that, this is the same quality 2D fighting that was on PS2, taking characters from five Capcom fighting series—*Street Fighter II*, *Street Fighter III*, *Street Fighter Alpha*, *Darkstalkers* and *Red Earth*—and mixing them all together while still retaining their individual nuances for some super-precise tag-team fighting. More than 20 playable characters and gorgeous endings from the creators of the *Street Fighter* comic are among the highlights. Chris Hoffman

System: Xbox
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: May

Stella Deus: The Gate of Eternity



The latest strategy-RPG coming out of Atlus should send chills down fans of the genre's spines as it combines a spellbinding narrative with a major graphics push—featuring larger, more detailed hand-drawn sprites and backgrounds—plus more than 50 hours of tactical gameplay, character management and inventory customization by fusing and creating items. Using the RAP (Replaceable Action Position) system, in which you spend 100 points on actions and moves of varying degrees per turn, special abilities and combos factor in to the combat, as do terrain and many other elements. *Stella Deus* is likely the next big thing in strategy-role playing. Dave Halverson

System: Xbox, PC **Developer:** Pinegrow
Publisher: Atlus **Available:** June





Dragon Ball Z Sagas



What a shame that the first next-generation Dragon Ball Z action game is looking utterly crap, especially given the GBA games have been pretty cool. The fact that it's a franchise with fans so loyal they'll step for just about anything is no reason to deliver such a shoddy piece of work. Little more than an ultra-simplistic and limited shooting action game riding on the most uninspired level design imaginable, Saga is far less than DBZ fans deserve. With any luck, our preview code was some kind of sick joke. There's simply nothing here worth a scrap of any gamer's time, regardless of age or brand loyalty. Fix it or bury it deep. *Dave Halverson*

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Avalanche Software
Publisher: Atari
Available: March

Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana



The power of alchemy is the major gameplay hook in the latest beautiful 2D strategy-RPG from NIS America. As Klein Kiesling, grandson of a famous alchemist, players will be able to extract elemental power from the plants, animals and objects they encounter, then synthesize them with 14 different Mana spirits to create a wealth of weapons and items for use in the game's strategic "Cost Turn Battles," in which more advanced moves use up more turns. Outside of combat, the game lets you run, jump and explore like in an action game, ensuring that Atelier Iris will be a unique gameplay experience. *Chris Hoffman*

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Gust
Publisher: NIS America
Available: May

The Godfather



It's cliché, but I gotta say it: this fall, EA has an offer you can't refuse. Based on the famed book and brilliant film, in The Godfather, you'll work your way up the food chain, carrying out orders and working through the ranks, spreading your web of violence. Spanning 10 years, you'll take part in all the ways of a gangster—mob hits, bank heists, drive-bys and extortion. Having a non-linear storyline, players will have to make decisions responsibly; do you talk with your fists or your voice? EA has even enlisted the help of top actors to voice their characters from the movie, including James Caan, Robert Duvall and the late Marlon Brando. *Tom Horn*

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC, PSP
Developer: EA Redwood Studios
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: Fall 2005

Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith



Is it any surprise that there's a game for George Lucas's third and final prequel to one of the most beloved trilogies of all time? RotS is looking to be action-packed, taking a third-person perspective, letting you control Anakin Skywalker (as he falls from grace) and Obi-Wan Kenobi. Force powers and lightsabers abound, and *Star Wars* lightsaber stunt coordinator Nick Gillard collaborates in RotS for some of the most realistic lightsaber battles we've seen this side of KOTOR. There's also multiplayer with some sweet versus modes—who wants to duel Darth Vader?! *Ashley Esqueda*

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: The Collective
Publisher: LucasArts
Available: May



L.A. Rush



Yes, kids, the Rush series (San Francisco Rush 2049 on N64 and Dreamcast was the last one) is back, and it's receiving a modern facelift with the big, open city of LA becoming your playpen. While you may see this as a turn towards street racing, that's not at all the intent. The arcade look and feel isn't going anywhere. Basically, if an area looks passable in any creative way imaginable, you go for it—drop off cliffs onto Pacific Coast Highway, zip down Santa Monica Pier, crash through downtown buildings, ramp over gas stations, leaving destruction in your wake. Just like real life. *Brady Flechter*

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Midway
Publisher: Midway
Available: Fall

Nintendo's Reggie-lution

Nearly one year after his memorable debut, Reggie Fils-Aime speaks on the company's past, present and especially future.

words Chris Hoffman

When he made his first major gaming-related appearance at last year's pre-E3 press event, Nintendo of America executive vice president of sales and marketing Reggie Fils-Aime immediately became one of the gaming industry's most recognizable personalities. Armed with his philosophy of "kicking ass" and "taking names," Fils-Aime assisted in unveiling several major GameCube titles and publicly debuting the Nintendo DS, which he would help propel to the position of one of the most sought-after products during the 2004 holiday season. Now, nearly a year later,

Nintendo finds itself faced with third-place North American console sales and the first serious contender to their dominance of the handheld market; who better to tell the story on how Nintendo will stay competitive than the guy who has been nicknamed The Reginator? In the following interview, Fils-Aime speaks on Nintendo's philosophy of innovation, their history of great game design, and how these are going to impact the continued success of the DS and the upcoming next-generation system dubbed Revolution. Judge for yourself whether Nintendo is learning from history or if they're doomed to repeat it.

Interview

Reggie Fils-Aime, executive vice president of sales and marketing, Nintendo of America

play: First of all, how have you been enjoying the bit of notoriety you've had since you spoke at the pre-E3 press conference last year?

Reggie Fils-Aime: You know, that event for me, as well as for Nintendo, was tremendous. And I think all of us were surprised and in awe of the reaction that we had, not only from the media but from the Nintendo fans, and I have to say quite candidly, what I've [been] excited [by] most is, frankly, the response to our products that we've unveiled since then. What we've been able to do over the last, call it, five-six months. The Nintendo fans have made Game Boy Advance SP the number-one selling hardware system of 2004, surpassing every other hardware system out there. In fact, I think we had a 54 percent market share of all hardware systems sold with SP. You have the almost 2 million Nintendo DS units that have been sold so far, the reaction the great GCN games like Paper Mario, Metroid Prime 2, Capcom's Resident Evil 4...to me, that's

the most exciting thing, where I was able to stand up and lay out a platform and an aggressiveness for Nintendo that we in the company have been able to deliver on, and the fans have reacted. That's the most exciting thing.

What about you personally? You had a lot of fan sites and whatnot popping up after that conference.

I did, and I tell you, it's made it tough for me to go shopping in my local specialty stores or anywhere else and getting a true representation of what's happening out in the marketplace. I've had the fortunate time to spend with a lot of the Nintendo fans, and it's been a lot of fun. It's been a little overwhelming at times.

Is there anything fans have done that you were especially amused by?

Reggie Fact!

Reggie's last name is pronounced "FEES-oh-MEY."

"...we're gonna do what Nintendo has done for so well for so long, and that is launch great games with innovative gameplay, and that certainly is gonna be driving us all through 2005."



Reggie Fact!

Reggie was born on 1/1/1971, and he's currently 33 years old. He's currently creating Pick-Up sticks.

You know, I saw a ton of the paste-up images that were done that took off on the "kicking ass and taking names" theme, and I thought that some of those were just tremendously hilarious.

So, since that press conference, how have things changed for Nintendo?

I think 2004 was a really strong year for Nintendo. We delivered great games and innovative gameplay, but I'll tell you, the best is yet to come. We are well on the way to driving DS out there in the marketplace. We have some great games coming up for GameCube this year and, of course, Revolution in 2006. So we are quite excited about what we've been able to do so far and thrilled with the potential of what's to come.

So you're pleased with the way the DS has been received so far?

We launched DS, and as we sit here in the middle of February, throughout all of the NOA properties, we've sold just about 2 million units. By the end of our fiscal [year], the number will be almost 3 million. On a worldwide basis, Nintendo's gonna sell almost 6 million DS units by the time our competitor enters the marketplace. That is just huge for us. But even more importantly, the consumer reaction in terms of their excitement level, their passion for DS, recommending it to a friend, we are quite pleased. We are also quite pleased that our selling line for DS, "touching is good," has made it into popular culture, so that's a lot of fun. We have done an extremely strong job across the board here at Nintendo of America to launch that product, and we've got more tricks up our sleeve in the future to continue driving it.

The one thing I've noticed about the DS though is that there haven't been that many games since launch. When will that be remedied?

We've just launched WarioWare, which is getting tremendous buzz out there. It really takes advantage of the stylus, as well as the voice activation with a number of the minigames. We're quite thrilled with the uptake of that so far. We have a number of games that will be launching later on in March and April, and you'll also see a number of great third-party games. Need for Speed and GoldenEye will be coming out quite shortly. So we're very excited, and we think that there's going to be quite a few different genres and different games for the consumer to get excited about with DS.

And, of course—you knew this question was coming—the PSP is almost here. How will Nintendo counter this and prevent from being overtaken by the competition?

By the time they launch, we're gonna sell

almost 3 million DSs in the Americas. We will have sold over 33 million total Game Boy Advances. So really the question is: what are they going to do to overtake us? As I've said, we have a number of great games coming over the next few months, not only on the DS platform I've already mentioned WarioWare; I've mentioned Need for Speed, GoldenEye; we have Metroid Prime: Hunters coming, which is probably one of the most anticipated titles, along with Mario Kart. On SP, we have Pokémon Emerald coming on May 1, and we expect this year, 2005, to sell almost 2 million of that title. So really, for us, we're gonna do what Nintendo has done so well for so long, and that is launch great games with innovative gameplay, and that certainly is gonna be driving us all through 2005.

Could this be considered complacency on Nintendo's part?

I would certainly say that we are not being complacent. As I think you may know, I am a Nintendo fan from long, long ago, and while I've only been on board for a little over a year, I'm well aware of the history of Nintendo, and we are doing things quite differently than we ever have as a company: partnering with key third-party licensees to launch fantastic software early in a platform's life, making sure that we have must-have software and space it out through the course of our introductory window, making sure that we partner with key retailers and drive that out in the marketplace. So we are not being complacent at all. I'm sure my team would echo that. What we are going to do is what we do best, and that is create great games, get them out in the marketplace, and drive that quite aggressively.

Good to hear. Now, one of Sony's biggest advantages right now is that, these days, it's just more "cool" than Nintendo is. How will you overcome that?

First off, I think we have done quite a bit over the past couple of years, driving our image and making Nintendo be much cooler than it's been in the past and, frankly, much more in touch, not only with the hardcore gamer, but with the casual gamer as well. And we're going to continue to drive that moving forward. Not only with the software we create, but with the advertising and other messaging we do. The product that Sony's going to launch, you know, it looks great; it's expensive; the battery life is still an issue that they're struggling with; the core design is still an issue that they're struggling with. We're gonna do what we do best, and it will be a war out there, I make no bones about that. But we're going to do everything that we can to be hugely successful in this marketplace.

On the console side of things, Nintendo has come up behind Sony for the past two generations. How are you preparing for the next round?

The way that we're looking at the next generation is truly provocative. The next system that we launch certainly will be much more powerful than we are today. It will have spectacular graphics. But quite frankly, all of that is what I will call "the price of entry." That's the minimum required to be successful. Where we're going to push the envelope is in four ways. First: innovation. We've talked with licensees; we have a sense of what our competitors are doing out there; and we are certainly pushing the vector of innovation much more aggressively than they are. You've seen that with Nintendo DS. Two screens, touch screen, voice activation—a huge

level of innovation that none of our competitors across any spectrum are really pushing. We will do that with Revolution. Second vector we will push is to make playing games more inviting. One of the things that we've seen on a worldwide basis—we haven't yet seen it to the same degree here in the United States—is games are becoming a little too complex, if you will, for the masses. And we're quite sensitive to that. So we will be working very hard to make the games themselves and the systems themselves very inviting to bring in that next generation of gamer into the business. Third: we will make our system quite intuitive. You look at why iPod has cleaned up on the MP3 business. Their device is incredibly intuitive, and we think there's something to be learned from that. And then, fourthly, making sure that

"...from my perspective, Nintendo needs to be viewed as the system for gamers, whether you're hardcore or casual."



our interface is provocative. Again, what we've been able to do with DS is just a small taste of what we think we can do with Revolution. So our challenge is: how do we change the rules in a way that makes sense for us, that drives us vectors that we historically have delivered against, to make sure that we bring something to bear on the marketplace that is truly new and different?

Are gamers really going to be convinced that they want something new and different instead of just something that's sleek and sexy and cool?

Quite frankly, I think what you've got to deliver on is both. And again, I think if you look at Nintendo DS, look at the final design that we launched versus what we shared at E3. We certainly worked hard to make it more sleek, to make it much sexier, and the consumer responded quite well. We don't think though that that's enough. It's got to be innovative and it needs to push the envelope in a way that really captures the gamers' and, frankly, the developers' imagination. That's where we think there's business to be had.

So, I was wondering about this past Christmas...did Metroid Prime 2 live up

"You always have to bring something new to the genre, otherwise it feels me-too and it feels like it's been done before."

to expectations in terms of sales?

You know, Metroid Prime 2 received tremendous reviews, tremendous accolades from the industry, but I think in fairness, we launched in a time period that was hugely competitive, and a lot of noise with one key title from each of the competitive systems. I think, in fairness, Metroid Prime 2 was a little lost in all of that noise. We're doing a number of things in the first quarter to get that game back in front of the consumer, and we've seen some good success. Would I have loved to have seen that be a million-unit title at the start? Absolutely. It didn't get there. But we are going to continue driving that title, because it does showcase what GameCube as a system can do in terms of the graphics capabilities and the overall gameplay.

Yeah, it was one of our favorites too. Now, despite games like Metroid Prime and Resident Evil 4, Nintendo systems are still seen as being for kids. Do you think that should change; do you want it to change; and if so, how will you get there?

I've been asked this question a lot, and from my perspective, Nintendo needs

Reggie Fact!

Reggie's office is on the first floor of Nintendo's Redmond, WA headquarters.

to be viewed as the system for gamers, whether you're hardcore or casual. That's our objective. And certainly, you've seen that from the games that we've launched. You mentioned Resident Evil 4, which is likely going to be the number-one selling game across all platforms in the month of January. You've seen it with Metroid Prime 2. You'll see it this year with Zelda. But in addition, we've got fantastic games like Donkey Konga and Jungle Beat and Paper Mario, which are much more all-family, but hardcore and casual gamers can both enjoy it. My objective, what we've gotta do, is we have to do both. We need to make sure that we continue to launch critical games that appeal to the hardcore gamer on GameCube, as well as do to the types of games that we do so well, Mario Party, Paper Mario, etc., to broaden our overall appeal. That's our objective.

That's actually something I've been

wondering about ever since you said something like that back at the pre-E3 event. Do you think Mario is more for casual gamers or hardcore gamers now? I'd think he's more for the hardcore gamers these days.

You know, Mario is one of those fantastic characters, and depending on the game, it can go in either direction. I would tell you that Mario Party, I think, is much more for casual gamers. I think that Paper Mario certainly appealed to the more hardcore gamer. Mario Kart, in all its variations, I think is very broad and pulls in both. So I think it really depends on the game and the structure of the game as to where the greatest appeal will be. But certainly it's much more of a mainstream character than most others out there on the marketplace.

Mario does star in a lot of games.

Donkey Kong stars in a lot of games. But how come there aren't that many brand-new IPs coming out of Nintendo?

Well, I'd challenge you on that. We've got a new kind of shooter/stealth game coming out in Geist that we think has tremendous possibility. We certainly are working on a number of other new IP characters and structures that you'll be hearing more about during E3. So, on one hand Nintendo is blessed with a number of great gaming franchises: Pokémon, Kirby, Mario, Donkey Kong, Zelda. I think arguably more gaming franchises than any other software maker out there. But certainly, we're also always looking to create brand-new franchises in a way that makes sense, and I think personally Geist could be a huge opportunity for us.

Indeed. Speaking of franchises, I was wondering about DK Jungle Beat. That game looks on the outside like the



"Our competitors are fierce, they're large, they're well funded, and no one in this space is going to let a company like Nintendo come in and reclaim the number-one position that we enjoyed for so many years."



Reggie Fact! Reggie joined Nintendo in December 2003.

traditional type of platformer that long-time Nintendo fans would look forward to, but then you have to play it with bongos. Why make it so you have to play it bongo-style instead of going a more traditional route?

Quite frankly, the gameplay truly is suited for the bongos. And what I mean by that is the way you power up, the way you battle the major bosses, the way you go through the game...I think if we had that on a standard controller, it wouldn't nearly be as much fun. So I think what we've been able to do is take a traditional platformer, turn it on its ear, and make it hugely provocative and hugely innovative, that, again, both your core gamers as well as casual gamers will be able to pick up and have a tremendous amount of fun with.

Do you think there's still a place for the traditional type of platformer?

I do think there's a role for that, but I think what you have to do is bring something new. You always have to bring something new to the genre, otherwise it feels me-too and it feels like it's been done before.

Fair enough. So, is it possible for Nintendo to become number one again in the home hardware market?

Is it possible? Absolutely. Is it something that we're focused on? Absolutely. Is it something that's going to take a huge amount of focus and thrust to get there? Absolutely. Our competitors are fierce, they're large, they're well funded, and no one in this space is going to let a company like Nintendo come in and reclaim the number-one position that we enjoyed for so many years. The way that we can become number one again is, frankly, by doing things the way that we've done them in the past in terms of leveraging our innovation, leveraging our software, but frankly, we also have to do some new things. We have to continue building on strong relationships with key licensees and get them on board to our next-generation platform much earlier than we have in the past. We have to bring new ideas and new thoughts into this marketplace and, frankly, do it much more aggressively than we have with GameCube. We have to have fantastic titles at the launch and sustain that for the first solid 12 months post-launch in order to drive penetration. Those are some fundamental things that historically we haven't done as well, and it's gotta be a key focus for us to be successful in the future.

Now, you mentioned third-party support,

and we've seen some third-party announcements already for the next consoles from Microsoft and Sony, but nothing for Nintendo yet. Is there a reason for that?

Our strategy is to share information with licensees when it makes the most sense—when they can best incorporate it into their design. We'll be sharing information at this upcoming Game Developers' Conference. Mr. [Satoru] Iwata, our worldwide president, will be speaking, so we'll be sharing more and more information over the next few months. And quite frankly for us, what we have wanted to do, needed to do, is to be exactly how we are driving innovation out in the marketplace. We've given that a tremendous amount of thought, and now we're at the point of being able to share that with key licensees.

I understand the reasons for not wanting to go online yet with a console, but do you think that's hurting Nintendo in the long run?

I personally believe that creating a sense of community, creating an ability for one player to link up with someone else, whether it's across the street or across the world, is a huge opportunity. And certainly, as we've pushed the envelope

with DS both from a local area network perspective as well as from wireless internet perspective, that is a key part of our strategy. Is that something that we're looking at extremely hard for Revolution? Absolutely. Are we going to share more details about that at E3? Absolutely.

Looking forward to it. So is the GameCube release list winding down? Is the focus mostly on Revolution now or do you still have some surprises in store?

There are quite a few surprises in store. From our perspective, the Zelda 3D game is the most highly anticipated title of 2005. That's gonna be a core driver for us. We have a couple other surprises for early next year. Licensees have over 60 key titles that they'll be launching between now and the end of the year. So development is still going strong for GameCube. Are we on the back-end of the lifecycle? Sure we are. But we believe that having some key titles out there for the core fans is critical as we manage through this transition.

What about GBA? GBA and DS were supposed to stand separately, but it seems that most of the announcements are for DS instead of GBA. I was at a third-party gamers' day recently, and all they had were DS games—nothing for GBA.

It's interesting. I have a list of about 120 GBA titles from third-party developers. If you look at it through their eyes, with a 33 million unit base to develop for, there's a huge market potential for Game Boy Advance games, and you will see a tremendous amount of those now through the end of the year. What you've seen...may have been an opportunity to showcase specifically DS games and a range of games that they're most proud of, but we still have very, very strong development happening for Game Boy Advance, not only from an internally Nintendo perspective, but also from a third-party perspective. So Game Boy Advance fans have nothing to fear. There are quite a number of great games coming out on the platform coming out over the next nine months.

Why should gamers be especially excited about Nintendo going into this year's E3?

I think they need to be excited about what we'll be sharing for DS in terms of games for the holiday season, as well as our plans for wireless play. I think fans have a lot to be excited about with what we'll talk about for the Zelda game, and I think our fans are going to be totally wowed with what we're going to share about Revolution. So if you thought my coming out party last year was exciting, just wait until this year's E3.

Lastly, have you taken my name?

I have not kicked your ass or taken your name, but, you know, there's always another opportunity. **play**



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave critiques every game based on how well it hits its target audience, and has been practicing what he preaches in print for 13 years. He truly lives for his games. Within everything Dave writes, you will also find a little bit of his personal love of the art of gaming and game creation, the driving force in his life outside of music and actual human interaction.

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D
Now playing: Psychonauts, God of War, Conker, Devil May Cry 3
Favorite NES Game: Battletoads



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Brady feels that when you've been playing video games since video games were invented, you tend to start to look past the unnecessary need to boil a game down to its mechanical parts and start to see the artistry and spirit of imagination that goes into its creation. It's never as simple as polygons and cool explosions.

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: God of War, Psychonauts
Favorite NES Game: Metroid



Chris Hoffman
Senior Editor

Chris has been playing games since the days of the 2600, back when graphics were blocks and plotlines were barely afterthoughts. Maybe that's why he considers gameplay first when reviewing most genres, and why he pays special attention to all things handheld. He also feels that a great story can be equally compelling, thus his love of RPGs.

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath
Favorite NES Game: Mega Man 2

Reviews

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God of War

050

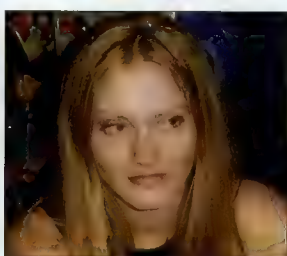
Blending extreme violence, spirited adventure, gorgeous settings and a story that treads new territory, the incredible God of War becomes an early contender for game of the year.



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: F.E.A.R.
Favorite NES Game: Simon's Quest: Castlevania II



Ashley "Veela" Esqueda
Associate Editor

To Ashley, video games are like magnificent pieces of art: you don't break down the piece as a whole to comment on the brush stroke method or colors used. She thanks her mother for playing Castlevania II after school, and everyone in elementary school for shunning her, because without them, her obsession with gaming would not have been possible.

Favorite genres: Action, RPG, adventure
Now playing: Star Wars Galaxies: Jump to Lightspeed
Favorite NES Game: Simon's Quest: Castlevania II



Michael Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of favorite developers, and though recent forays into the world of MMORPGs have rather consumed him, he'll always have time for a game of Bangalo.

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Gran Turismo 4
Favorite NES Game: Contra

Rating System

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game isn't just the very best—it's the best of the best.

- 10... Perfect
- 9... Extraordinary
- 8... Great
- 7... Good
- 6... Decent
- 5... Average
- 4... Below average
- 3... Poor
- 2... Bad
- 1... Terrible



The question was never really if Doom 3 on Xbox would be good. The question was: just *how* good? The game would obviously be compromised, emerging from the technological powerhouse of the PC to a console that, while certainly capable, simply didn't have the same juice. Let's just say the transplant was a big success and leave it at that. What matters is that Doom 3 looks amazing, plays as well as it possibly could next to the acclaimed PC behemoth, and carries a foreboding atmosphere that is unmatched in a first-person shooter.

Mood is Doom's commanding asset. As you traverse the labyrinthine halls of this Mars military facility overrun by demons from hell, every step is filled with a sense of dread. Death exists around every corner. Blood hangs on the walls. Evil laughter and morbid screams echo down your spine. The horrors may be dominated by literal sights—religious symbols and altars and glowing candles and the devil—but you can't escape the unsettling spirit of it all.

The bleak, crumbling sci-fi setting is effectively built and visually strong, but the real draw here is the striking lighting. Shadows creep all around you, hiding the monsters and filling in a fascinating

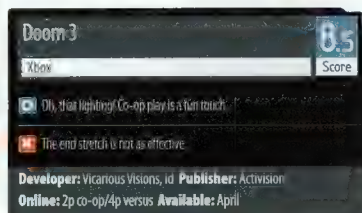


dimension to the world. Watching a spinning fan manipulate a light source is just too cool.

If you decide to pony up the extra 10 bucks to get the collector's edition of Doom 3, you'll be treated to Ultimate Doom and Doom 2, which humorously show their age but are still a fun nostalgic trip. You'll also see just how faithful id was in maintaining the straightforward, no-frills gameplay for Doom 3—run down winding halls, unleash endless rounds of ammunition, get a key card, do it again. There's very little exposition to deal with, although PDA devices are all over the place, setting up effective details that shed light on the facility you're on and exactly what's been going on all around you.

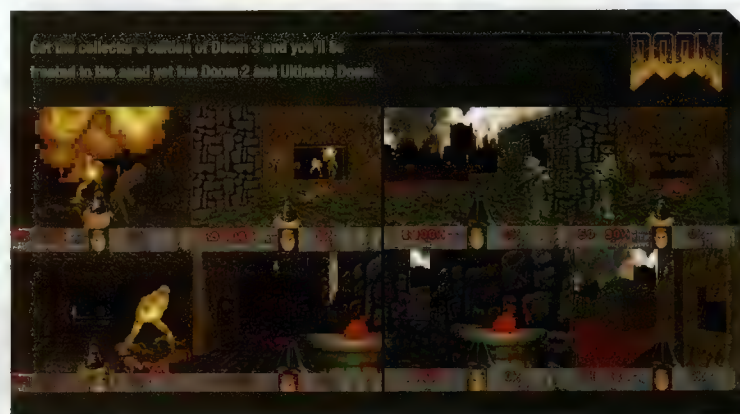
The same tricks start to wear a little thin towards the end; enemies exhibit the same tendencies, the same setups, popping up in nearly every room you enter, and you get to a point where you aren't surprised by their existence. Thankfully, the balls-out, frenetic engagement never stops, and that classic gameplay is a blast to the end. Brady Fiechter

"Mood is Doom's commanding asset. As you traverse the labyrinthine halls... every step is filled with a sense of dread."



Doom 3

A first-person shooter that goes bump in the night



Rise of the Kasai

Marked by death, a sequel is born

A two-player game where my PS2 is player two? Bottlerocket must have had me in mind when they designed *Rise of the Kasai*. Sports and fighting games are meant for two players, not action games, at least beyond the age of 12. Simulating a second player, however, in a game designed for branching, support and unison play is deeply rewarding experience. Incorporating that simulated comrade may come at a wee price, but the dividends far outweigh the cost. Certain areas in *Rise of the Kasai*—the first boss battle, for instance—favor Rau, while in other instances, should you be playing as Tati, patiently stalking prey and soaking in your surroundings, don't be surprised if Rau comes plodding by and blows your cover. Chances are it was your fault in

some way, but it's all in a good day's work, offing Kasai like *American Idol* rejects.

Essentially, in order to truly reap the benefits of RotK, you need to give yourself to it, really live in it. It's uncanny how well the AI responds when properly executed; you just really need to study your surroundings at times to reveal the correct course of action. If your companion can help, he or she will, and if not, you know there's a way for you to overcome the situation, which may or may not include drawing your Buhjer and dismembering several blue-skinned devils in a bloody rampage. Bottlerocket directs each level like a scene in a movie, setting it up for you to nail as the star...or you can just charge in and fight, which works to a degree, but detracts from the overall



"...in order to truly reap the benefits of RotK, you need to give yourself to it, really live in it."



allure of the game—ambitious design that might fall apart if any single element was below par—a fine line Bottlerocket walks with grace.

In order to compensate for its rubbery animation and the number of characters on screen, the Kasai are simply modeled (though well silhouetted), and there's not so much emphasis on saturating color and complex texture as there is on architecture, effects such as glimmering pools, reflecting natural stone floors and foot trails, and ambient sound which, in this case, is award-caliber. RotK is akin to playing in a painting accentuated by cutscenes where the viewer's eye

actually rides the painter's brush. Quite extraordinary.

Regarding the screenplay, other than to say the Rakus are custodians of the Mark of Kri, and that these marks in the wrong hands would be bad, I'll leave plumbing the depths of this wonderfully told story—which segues from 10 years prior to 10 years after Rau's rendezvous with fate—to you. Loosely translated, the sepia-toned levels of Baumusu and Griz (which serve as a nice story device and to gain a sense of the Rakus' pride) take place before Rau, with the full-color levels, which make up the bulk of the game, belonging to Rau and his tainted sister Tati, who, as expected, is the bright, shining star of the game.

Baumusu and Griz are a well suited pair of orthodox warriors—one rotund and full of fire and one old, wily and wired (nothing like a wise old coot with a score to settle)—but they aren't nearly as intriguing as the siblings. Rau is pretty much as we remember him—brutal, stealthy, great with a bow and hard to bring down—but Tati is truly a joy. Wearing her taint of evil ever so well, she's as graceful a killing machine as you'll ever encounter, prancing and contorting to the series' focus-beam system like a half-naked gymnast from hell. All of the stealth and instant kills in the game, which spurt and squirt with

the best of 'em, are charming vignettes of death, but one in particular, where Tati meticulously tacks her prey to the wall with a dagger through the head, pulling it out as they draw their last breath, is especially sodden with guilty pleasure. Together with the deep, weapon-based combo system that smartly defaults to unassigned buttons, Spirit Guides that light the way negate the need for various hard-to-deliver camera perspectives, and new items like Tati's toxic mushrooms, the fighting action in *Kasai* is as anticipated—excellent—and you'll need all the help you can get when either you or Rau alert the Kasai. The enemies in RotK are not only plentiful, but prone to ambush and, unlike most stealth games, they have 20/20 vision.

It all adds up to a sequel that's innovated and improved upon in every conceivable way, groomed like its predecessor for a discerning palette. Given Kri's significant word of mouth coupled with the massive PS2 user base and good timing, *Rise of the Kasai* will undoubtedly serve to further the bloodline if indeed Tati is delivered from evil. Dave Halverson

Rau looks on as Tati does what she does best—silently dismembering Kasai.

Rise of the Kasai

PlayStation 2

8.0

Score

An innovative, artistic, unique and deeply diverse action game with big-time staying power, amazing audio and superb storytelling.

Rau's targeting is a little spotty; camera takes a few seconds to stick for wall hugs, synching with the AI can be tricky at times.

Developer: Bottlerocket

Publisher: Sony

Online: None

Available: April

048 April 2005

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There is that rare game that goes beyond the fun, beyond the simple engagement, stepping into the realm of higher emotion. It sticks with you, makes you feel something few games have, takes you to a place that begins to move you. Maybe you've felt it, maybe you haven't. It's not readily definable, and it's what makes video games uniquely special, and it's what too few game developers seem to even perceive. There can and will be a growing power in the art of gamemaking, and when you experience that awesome game that's applied the tap, you're alive in its world. God of War crackles with that power.

Given the breadth of its achievements, you can swiftly forgive any faults; nitpick, get critical, and you will find them, but they predominantly exist in that awkward video game realm where the standard has been set, and you accept it and revel in it. (The best movies are simply more mature in their execution, more assured in the delivery of their ideas.) What separates God of War from the typical is that its ideas are so grand. When it falters, you're still grateful for the imagination and passion.

God of War is an extremely violent, tremendously graphic game. Inspired by Greek mythology, Kronos, its ruthless, mortal hero, is tasked with saving the war-torn city of Athens, which is in the death-throngs of the god of war, Ares. In a gripping scene following a massacre on the battlefield, Kronos, infamous for his brutal tactics, gives his soul to Ares in exchange for being spared after falling in the face of the enemy. But his devotion will quickly turn, prompted by the gods to seek out and murder Ares, while quieting his own roiling demons.

As you slice your way through the



These ladies may be lovely, but Kronos has no qualms about driving their faces into the ground.





glorious, captivating land, the carnage is carried out by the graceful, terrifically satisfying swing of the double chain blades. The attacks build into enormous combos, reaching into triple digits if you really get into the groove, balletically moving from one aggressive foe to another as they swarm in from all sides. Magic comes heavily into play, joining the melee combat in perfect succession. The combat is intensely entertaining, and the sudden, forceful depiction of the deaths is remarkably empowering. This is violence done right.

There are a lot of magnificent cutscenes moving the story forward, in which the most graphic moments occur. The faint of heart would look at these scenes in

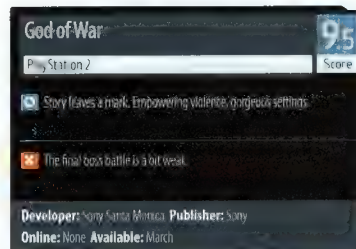
disgust. They would also miss the finer point of the game, its effective style smartly woven into the undercurrents of the narrative. Kronos is a heartless killer—there's an unsettling task where you're asked to push a screaming, caged man into a stream of fire for sacrificial passage—but his vulnerability and tortured conscience reveal a greater weight to the story, which spills into the flow of the gameplay. I was left impacted in a way I have never been in a game, thinking of the implications of his character and the philosophical subtext that it brought.

Games present an opportunity to show us new worlds, but they often arrive as neat and interesting more than wondrous and truly captivating. Playing *God of War*, I was transfixed by its visions, which seemed to never stop. The hypnotic siren creatures calling out in the wind-blown deserts. The statues towering into the sky. The mythological beings carrying entire structures on their backs as they lumber in the distance. The world is further established by incredible level design and enriching scenario breaks. A handful of inventive puzzles also hit the mark. One area later on is in itself a giant puzzle chamber, nicely changing up the pacing, and while you do see the old-school ideas creeping in—the positioning of blocks comes into play—they are handled great. The gamemakers obviously maintain a love for the classics, tossing in some precarious platforming as well.

And talk about precarious: how about Kronos, letting off a little steam after driving stakes through the skulls of an angry trio of Hydras, turning the cold

shoulder on the two naked women who just occupied his bed. There are a couple of scenes of nudity in *God of War*. Does it work? You decide. In context, it actually does, if not for the silly silicone-inspired mounds that were the last thing you'd call attractive or sexy. It does speak to the bigger picture the game is attempting, hit and seldom miss.

There's just such breadth and scope to *God of War*, catapulting well past the typical action game. The foundation is certainly the combat, but the vigorous way the presentation and copious cutscenes slot in around the core exploration and gameplay make you feel a part of a more organic, dramatic place. The game contains so much energy and conviction, so much skill and spirit. There came a point where I was totally lost to it, in the way you are to a great movie—to any powerful art form. *Brady Fiechter*



The enemies are as fun to admire as they are to rip apart.

"...the sudden, forceful depiction of the deaths is remarkably empowering."



Shin Megami Tensei

Digital Devil Saga

From within you it awakens

Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga retains everything I enjoyed about the previous game in the franchise, SMT: Nocturne, while removing the one aspect that I felt held it back—the reliance on collecting soulless demons as the main gameplay hook. With that one change, Digital Devil Saga becomes a game that's every bit as deep, dark and distinctive as its predecessor, only now with that additional personal element of a playable cast of intriguing characters to build up and care about as you delve into DDS's twisted world of demonic, post-

apocalyptic factional warfare.

As with previous SMT titles, Digital Devil Saga is a game that simply oozes style. The visuals are a stunning mix of anime and gritty realism, giving the game a bold, clean look, while cutscenes offer shades of *The Matrix*—and the music just plain rocks. The story provides another highlight, with a grotesque and brutal, yet introspective, tale of humans transformed into demons who literally eat their enemies for strength. This provocative metaphor for the power of emotion probes deep into the meaning of humanity. SMT fans will also appreciate



Above: This looks like actuality. Go down, pretty easy if Serph can figure out its weak point.



"As with previous SMT titles, Digital Devil Saga is a game that simply oozes style."

the return of familiar, warped demonic foes.

More important, however, is the return of the excellent Press Turn battle system—a system that may seem like traditional turn-based combat on the surface, but in fact is actually far deeper, rewarding players for fighting intelligently and exploiting enemies' weaknesses, punishing them for fighting without thinking first. This system is taken to its limits with a vast amount of character customization options, allowing the player to specialize characters in any number of deadly arts, be it in the realm of physical or magical, offensive or defensive. To me, this is far more enjoyable than in Nocturne, since effectiveness in battle now relies more on the player's skill, rather than the guesswork involved in discovering too late that you should have kept that other demon instead of sacrificing him for a not-so-snazzy new one. The new customization system does

have its downside, however: the number of customization options and the high monetary costs involved make building up characters' skills a very time-consuming process, and specific skills are sometimes essential for surviving certain battles.

For me, Digital Devil Saga is the best installment of the Shin Megami Tensei franchise yet, and a great RPG in its own right. Edgy, involving and with an added dose of personality, Digital Devil Saga earns itself a spot in the upper echelon of PS2 RPGs. Chris Hoffman

Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga

8.0

PlayStation 2

Score

Unique, dark and stylish. Intriguing characters and story. Great battle system.

Learning abilities takes a lot of time and money

Developer: Research & Development 1

Publisher: Atlus

Online: None

Available: March



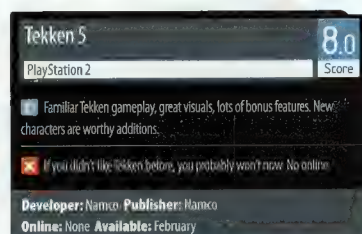
Some players prefer Virtua Fighter. Others like Dead or Alive. Personally, Tekken's my game of choice when it comes to weapons-free 3D fighting, and as such, I'm falling in love all over again with this latest installment. Featuring the same top-notch core mechanics that drove the series to greatness, Tekken 5 fixes the minor faults of its predecessor to deliver another amazingly deep fighting game that should leave fans floored.

As always, Tekken 5 sticks to its winning formula of realistic martial arts mixed with just enough fantasy to keep things endlessly exciting. Each character is loaded with more special moves than the average gamer can comprehend, while still retaining enough accessibility so that anyone can play. The three initial newcomers (of more than 30 fighters total) are welcome additions; Asuka makes a nice substitute for Jun, while Raven has some neat tricks up his sleeve and Feng Wei is just badass. As expected, the graphics are poetry in motion. The characters don't look much better than the last installment, but the lighting looks better than ever, the CG is once again among the best the industry has ever produced, and the faux destructible floors add some newfound visual flourish. Those who had issues with Tekken 4 will be glad to know that those wrinkles have been ironed out: fighters can no longer be repositioned prior to the match starting, the arena obstacles have been removed, the jumping and crouching controls have been fixed, and

there's no sloped terrain to interfere with the combat. It's also worth noting that there's no online gameplay, but I'd rather pummel my friends in person anyway.

Outside of the main one-on-one modes, Namco has outdone themselves with the number of extras packed into Tekken 5. The highlight: the first three Tekken games, all available in arcade-perfect form. True, they don't hold up like they once did, especially visually, but they're still very cool. The Devil Within adventure mode is pretty neat too, with some solid gameplay that's been adapted well to this genre; unfortunately, bland environments will put most players to sleep after a level or two. As for the customizable character appearances, well, it won't rock your world, but giving Jin a "metrosexual hairstyle" is at least worth a laugh.

All told, Tekken 5 doesn't change a lot, and it doesn't revolutionize its genre, but it still delivers some of the best bare-knuckle 3D fighting out there, plus a lot more. That's good enough for me. Chris Hoffman



Tekken

Going strong for more than a decade, Tekken's still got it

...another amazingly deep fighting game that should leave fans floored

The veteran Manji
ninja meets the
rookie assassin.

A full-page background image of Dante from Devil May Cry 3. He is standing in a dark, smoky environment, wearing his signature red leather jacket and black pants. He has white hair and is looking upwards. A large sword is visible behind him, and a handgun is in his right hand. The overall tone is dark and atmospheric.

Devil May Cry

Dante's Awakening

Dante makes his killer return

If you were the one shedding the tears when Dante took an unexpectedly sour detour in Devil May Cry 2, dry your eyes. Devil May Cry 3 marks the demon hunter's bold return. And this time, he's up against some of the most brutally tough denizens of hell a video game could sanely throw your way. Capcom obviously had a point to prove, spurred by criticisms that the second game was a boring breeze. Point made.

Devil May Cry 3 is not cheap in its difficulty, demanding that you study specific enemy patterns with a keen eye, relying on a multitude of weapons and combos, smartly tailoring Dante to your own effective style of play. If you're looking to enjoy going through the casual motions of a multitude of stylish, acrobatic juggles by railing on a few buttons for a quick visual payoff, your controller will be in pieces by the time you lose your patience in the first boss battle—a return of the Grim Reaper, signaling the first of many imposing, wonderfully imagined creatures. Learn and hone your attacks, consider the deceptively complex structure of the game, and the reward is tremendously satisfying.

Part of the game's pleasure that goes beyond the first two efforts is the need to properly enhance Dante and his growing stash of weapons with experience and the souls of the vanquished. Here's the kicker: six distinct styles of play are available, which range from becoming more of a blocker or weapons user to more aggressive use of the blades or a reliance on quick evasion. It's also extremely important to manage your allocation of souls for items and upgrades, deciding what you'll need the most in a particular situation. Do you stock up on continues—it can be a nasty affair struggling to a boss battle, only to die and have to do it all again—or add to your devil gauge? Do you go straight for better moves, or pad your health recovery to assist in progression? Every time you buy something invaluable, the price goes up for the next purchase, which makes weighing your options

even more important. And souls for the purchases aren't in abundance, especially if you aren't upping your style points.

While the emphasis is on the action over adventure, the world is fairly intricately laid out, set up with several small stretches of gameplay that link to what feels like one big set piece. There's some minor puzzle solving, and you find yourself attending to a nice assortment of tasks and interacting with the environment in a way that lends the game a stronger immersion. The Gothic architecture is magnificent—some of the most interesting and unusual building blocks for a game I've seen in a while. As a game of pure fantasy, the gamemakers had a freedom to show us wild sights, and here they are elegant, decadent and rich in details. I especially like the level set inside a giant leviathan, with its pools of intestinal acid and winding innards leading up to a finale in the heart chamber.

Dante gets snatched up by this breathtaking beast as he's falling from a vertiginous tower, following a nasty battle with his brother Vergil, whose enmity with Dante has reached its climax in a drive to control the demon world. These pauses for dialogue and action sequences are nothing short of over-the-top and completely ridiculous—and eccentrically cool in the

hands of the Japanese stylists. Devil May Cry misses the beat occasionally, too in love with its quirky style at times, and the latest take on demon-bashing hangs on choice observations like: "If the demons return, the world will be thrown into chaos." Oh yeah?

It's too bad the game doesn't explore more of the unique inspirations behind its demonic creations. Instead, we get a posturing Dante quipping about wearing cologne and being the biggest badass in the world; he comes across as the high-school punk you wanted to kick in the balls, not invite to the party. No matter. There's little room in these dark festivities for talking as your eyes soak in the remarkable imagery and your brain willingly fights to keep up with the incendiary demon slaying. *Brady Flechter*

Devil May Cry 3

PlayStation 2

8.5
Score

■ Gorgeous settings, and the enemy design is original and elegantly creepy.

✗ Dumb story, dumb dialogue, treading into camp style.

Developer: Capcom Publisher: Capcom

Online: None Available: March



Even the face of death has nothing on Dante.



"Learn and hone your attacks, consider the deceptively complex structure of the game, and the reward is tremendously satisfying."



Unreal Championship 2

The Liandri Conflict

Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict reeks of polished environments, shiny and reflective surfaces, well-designed and colorful particle and beam effects. Yet at some point, perhaps when its deep-throated in-game announcer bleats out "Adrenaline full!" for the 85th time in as many seconds, life ceases to lose all meaning. Bloodsports, especially fought by gravity-defying combatants with delightful flesh-rendering weaponry, should never be this mundane.

The shooter's equivalent of a pabulum and vodka breakfast, Unreal Championship 2 takes the well-loved Unreal in strange new directions. This time around, there's a decided emphasis on third-person-based melee combat, and each of the game's warriors carries an energy blade, staff or set of gauntlets with which to alienate foes from breathing. With these weapons drawn, characters can create shields and deflect incoming projectiles, sometimes injuring enemies. It's also possible here to briefly paralyze a foe, allowing for a series of exaggerated, close-quarters Mortal Kombat-esque finishers.

Great attempts have been made to blend and balance the melee combat with the traditional gun-based play, but Epic's stabs are wild here. Despite the ability to block and reflect shots, the general rule of thumb seems to be a good man with a gun beats a good man with an energy staff eight—maybe nine—times out of 10. Distance makes melee weapons a liability; long-range reflections are tough to pull off and shields can only be used for brief periods. Smart killers will quickly learn to hunt melee weapon-wielding targets, plunking away at them from the comfort of many yards and retreating when threatened.

UC2, as a first-person shooter, works amazingly well. The hyperbole of its combat provides for frantic killfests, and the game doesn't fail to provide cool energy- and explosive-based weapons. Adrenaline powers, accessed by tapping the X button on the Xbox's controller, allow for greater agility, healing powers and various offensive and defensive strikes. Online and with multiple players, the game fairly well soars, elevating players with a sort of manic glee inspired by the heat of extended firefights.

"...the general rule of thumb seems to be a good man with a gun beats a good man with an energy staff..."



UC2 is at its best when you're wielding big guns and dodging big explosions.

UC2, as Midway's attempt to give a classic series some new—as the kids say—flava by replacing the C in its combat with a K, works less well. Melee combat might have worked if Unreal wasn't such a polished and unreservedly straightforward shooter. It seems decidedly out-of-place to hear Mr. Narrator exhorting players to "Finish him!" when an enemy is stunned, and the Killer Kombo button combinations needed to perform these coups de grace add absolutely nothing to play. As it stands, Midway has shoehorned its popular franchise onto Epic's, and the results are two great tastes that taste ultimately blah together.

Be wary of the game's single-player mode, too. It's necessary to plod through its tedious challenges to unlock stages, modes and characters, but is more chore than adventure. Many times, the game offers a gorgeous and multitiered killing field, and then demands a player to spend inordinate amounts of time running back and forth across it to find the challenge's solitary enemy. One-on-one combat truly doesn't work here, but

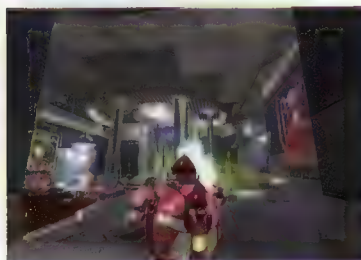
Unreal Championship 2 seems to delight in replaying this unpalatable scenario time and again—with each new stage requiring more kills, more wandering, more exposure to the incessant narrator's bleating until Unreal's reality bites becomes the great truth of the day.

Celebrate creativity. In a world where adding the number two after a game's title signifies progress, it's nice to know developers and publishers are willing to experiment. Still, understand that Unreal Championship 2 doesn't quite get the formula right, and it's only by the grace of its online play that it manages to eke out its score. Greg Orlando

Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict		8.5
Xbox		Score
Some great first-person shooting in the grand tradition of the franchise.		
Melee combat ultimately doesn't get the single-player mode is a bit of a waste.		
Developer: Epic Games Publisher: Midway		
Online: 8p versus Available: March		

Scrapland

Developed by Mercury Steam, Published by Enlight Software



"The amount of detail in Chimera is nothing short of amazing. The textures were superb everywhere I looked, from the metal to the bump mapping on the bots..."

When I booted up Scrapland and saw that American McGee was the executive producer, I figured I was in for one hell of a twisted ride...I was wrong. Scrapland surely isn't your standard creepy-McGee fare. It was something different. If I had one sentence to describe it, it would probably be: "Funked-out GTA in a space-age world inhabited entirely by robots." Perhaps I should elaborate...

You begin Scrapland as D-Tritus, an immigrated robot fresh off the ship to Chimera. Chimera's inhabitants have nicknamed their world Scrapland, because the entire place is made of scraps, including the robots living there. You're given a job as a journalist and your first story is the investigation of murder in Chimera. Murder's a whole different ballgame in Scrapland; there's this nifty little invention called the Great Database, which stores the matrices of all citizens of Chimera. When you die, you're simply reconstructed by the GD and you're all set. You have to pay up to be rebuilt though...those that are poor end up in jail after they're regenerated. The murders in Chimera would seem no big deal, but the people being killed off have also had their matrices stolen from the GD, making it impossible to bring them back. This has people freaked out, and none other than our scrappy hero D-Tritus is on the case.

D-Tritus is your average, comedic gumshoe with a twist. He's given the power to "hack" into the GD and impersonate Scrapland inhabitants. This makes the game infinitely open-ended and gives missions options. There's always a

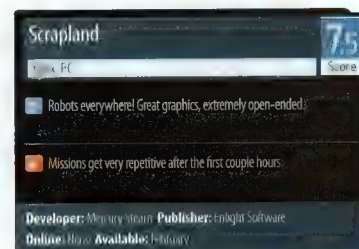


goal in Scrapland, but it's your choice on how to get there. You can infiltrate a police station by impersonating a police robot, or you can sneak in as D-Tritus.

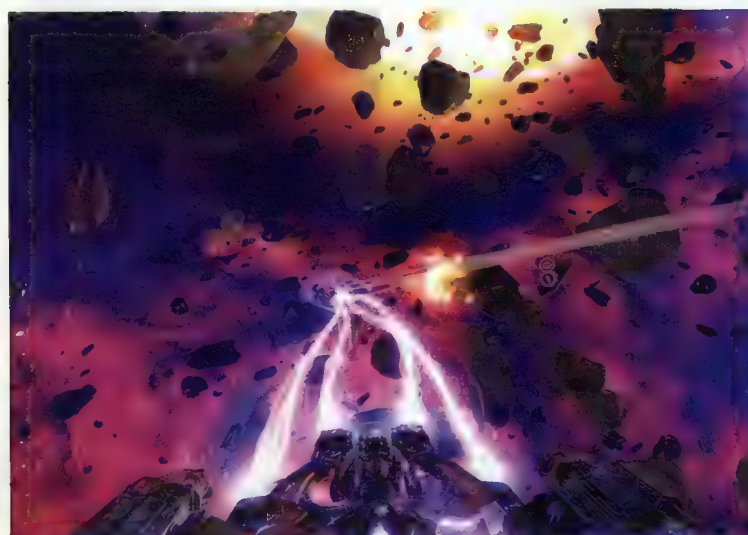
Chimera itself is incredible. With a number of huge instanced locations like the bank, the press and the police station, Scrapland could have simply gotten away with pushing a linear storyline and leaving it at that. Fortunately, Mercury Steam created a vast infrastructure, which D-Tritus (and the rest of Chimera) can use to get from location to location. The amount of detail in Chimera is nothing short of amazing. The textures were superb everywhere I looked, from the metal to the bump mapping on the bots as they went about their everyday business. Not a corner in Chimera went by unnoticed by Mercury Steam, this I assure you.

Something that did get lost was the repetitiveness of the missions. Not only did it feel laborious toward the end of the game, but I found myself doing almost the exact same mission back-to-back in a couple instances. It seemed like there were only four different kinds of missions

in the game: take photos of something, destroy something/someone, race someone, or infiltrate somewhere and get info. The multiplayer was standard and fairly forgettable, and when I got to the single player's finish, I felt like I had finished a marathon I was forced to run. Then again, GTA has a play style similar to Scrapland's, so if you're into that, you'll love this game. All in all, Scrapland's parts make a pretty decent whole, but there just wasn't that old black magic there, that feeling that captivates you and keeps you glued to your seat longing for more. Ashley Esqueda



As much as I liked shooting ships down in Chimera (L), possessing robots on the ground was flippin' sweet (R).





GRAN TURISMO 4

The best the PS2 will ever see?

Thought I hesitate to admit it, I wasn't losing sleep waiting for Gran Turismo 4 to come out. I assumed, of course, that it would be fantastic, and no doubt I was looking forward to it, but without the system leap from Gran Turismo 2 on PlayStation to Gran Turismo 3 on PlayStation 2, I didn't see as much reason to be excited other than the expectation that it would be "merely" great. This feeling really settled in once it became known that the promised online play was not going to make it.

My relatively modest expectations were shown the door once I booted the final game up. "Holy crap, look at this thing," was my first thought. Of course, I'd played GT4 Prologue and seen the game at E3, but there is no replacement for having the game at home to really see what's going on.

And what's going on is detail. Huge

amounts of detail. The step up in graphics from Gran Turismo 3 is spectacular and caught me a little off guard. And it's more than just the game's ability to display at 1080i—the only PS2 game I know of capable of this—that makes it look so nice. Everything, from the courses to the cars, has been given a new sheen, and keen observers will notice added complexity everywhere. Some neat engine tricks allow for epic, photo-realistic expanses that are the best I've seen in any racing game, and the car models truly are a wonder to behold and a marvel of texturing.

Also benefiting from an overhaul is the game's interface and structure. Accessed now through a large world map, GT4 is now even more user-friendly and entertainingly laid out, with racing challenges divided up by country and type. This makes it easier

The game is not a visual refraction (the track is mostly flat), but the feeling of motion coming off the car is second to none.

B-Spec and Photo Mode

Two brand-new modes have been introduced in GT4. The first is the B-Spec mode. Here, you serve as a team boss and sit back and watch your car battling on track. You can give basic commands to push, overtake, cruise and pit, and it's a quick way to make money if you don't always want to race. Photo Mode, as its name suggests, allows you to photograph your car. The images produced are hi-res and can even be printed out.

to move around, trying different challenges and seeing everything on offer in this huge game. This is also where you will find the amusing new B-Spec and Photo Mode (see sidebar, above).

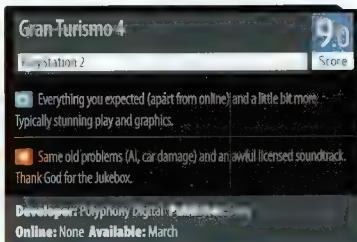
But really, all this is just window dressing for the game itself. Regardless of how many cars there are or how much tuning you can do, as always for me, it boils down to the quality of that moment when the controller is in my hand. And it is here where GT4 shows its greatest worth. No question, every game in the series has felt great, but this one is in another league. You can truly feel the extra detail in the physics model, almost as if some mystical screws have been tightened somewhere. The added gravity gauge goes a little ways towards giving you a greater "feel" for your car's behavior as well. But the crucial thing is that none of this amounts to an obscure level of realism, but an accessible one. Some cars are absolute handfuls, but nothing is beyond your control. This is quite a good trick. So even though I have this image in my head of Gran Turismo as this great beast that will never reveal all its secrets to me, I will always enjoy trying.

Lest the reader grow tired of this gush, let's get to some dirt. So what happened to the online play? Well, it's not difficult to understand once you get a sense of the

meticulousness surrounding every facet of this game. Anyone who's played an online racing game knows that even the best suffer from latency issues, causing your opponents to jerk about on the track, and that simply would not do for a game of GT4's feeling of refinement. We might yet see an online update (or it may just wait till PS3), but I'd rather have it perfect than not.

Some may not feel so generous, and indeed, one can still find plenty of things to complain about in Gran Turismo 4 beyond the lack of promised online. The opponents' AI, for instance, is still only one measure removed from a robot, mercilessly following the racing line regardless of your actions. I don't mind this too much, as I always felt I was battling the track more than the other cars, but I can see how some might really hate this. Also, there is still no damage model to speak of, only a brief time penalty for especially hard hits, so you can still cheat your way around the races using the other cars as occasional buffers. Not that I recommend such cheap behavior...

Only a fool would allow these little complaints to take away from what is otherwise an astounding and huge game that, for all its size, scope and ambition, remains light on its feet and in perfect fighting shape, ready to take on Enthusia and Forza. Let the games begin... Michael Hobbs



"No question, every game in the series has felt great, but this one is in another league."



Resident Evil Outbreak

File #2

The chat-free online adventure continues

I've always liked this series. I really respect it for branching out and trying something new online to join the ranks of the typical shooting, role playing and strategy titles.

Resident Evil Outbreak File #2 picks up right where the first left off, with the same group of eight unlucky citizens trying to survive in Raccoon City, this time in a zombified zoo. This is a great backdrop, as it allows for all manner of mutated creatures to join the fray, making for some truly exciting encounters.

From a gameplay standpoint, not much has changed in this four-player cooperative action game. You still have the same choice of eight characters, each with different abilities to suit different play styles, from healing to fighting to item creation. Unfortunately, you still cannot chat in real-time during the actual gameplay, limited once again by a set of basic voice prompts (though "I'm sorry" has thankfully been added). You can now request items from other players, which helps a bit with interaction, but I really wish you could just talk to the people on your team. This is very

frustrating if you know the solution to a particular puzzle, for example, but just can't communicate it to others.

With that said, this is the type of relatively quick online game like Phantasy Star Online that likes to be played over and over again, and it's not long before enough people have a good understanding of the levels to make most groups enjoyable. Good planning in the chat room before diving into the levels helps, and with a good working knowledge of the levels and some their various paths and solutions, the game becomes what it's meant to be: a fun cooperative experience in the very provocative world of Resident Evil. Michael Hobbs

Resident Evil Outbreak File #2

PlayStation 2

8.0
Score

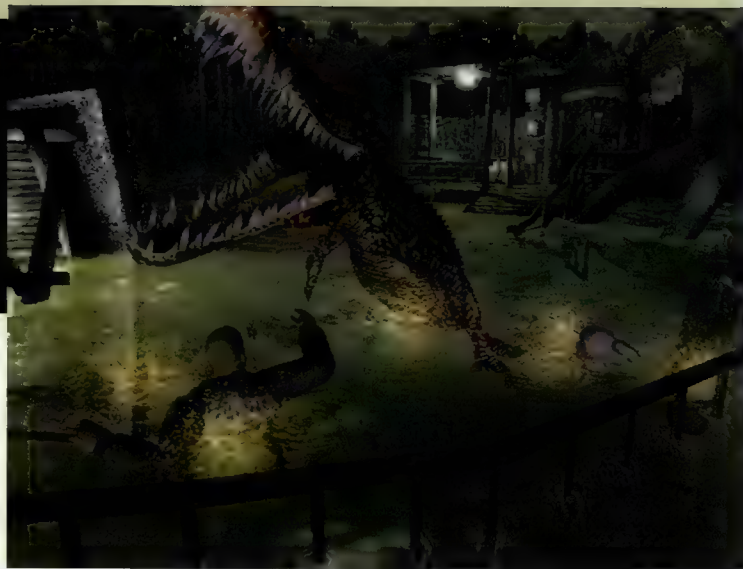
Same simple and fun cooperative gameplay from the first with an imaginative new environment.

Still no in-game chat function, hard drive doesn't help much with loading.

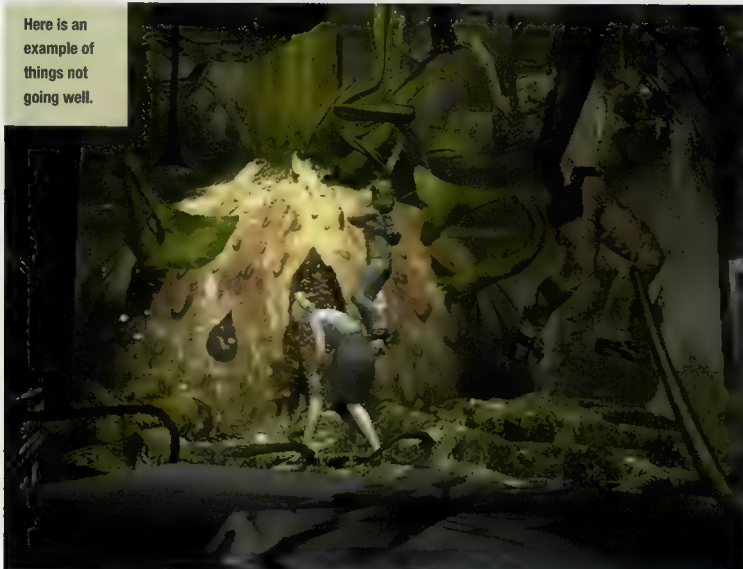
Developer: Capcom Production Studio 1 Publisher: Capcom Online: 4p co-op Available: April

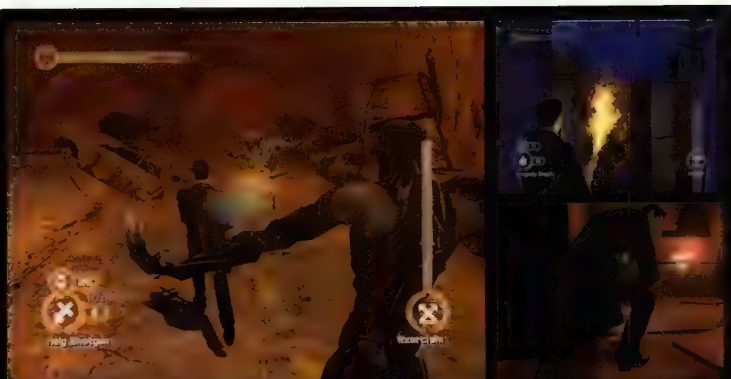


"I really respect [Outbreak] for branching out and trying something new online..."



Here is an example of things not going well.





Constantine

PlayStation 2, Xbox

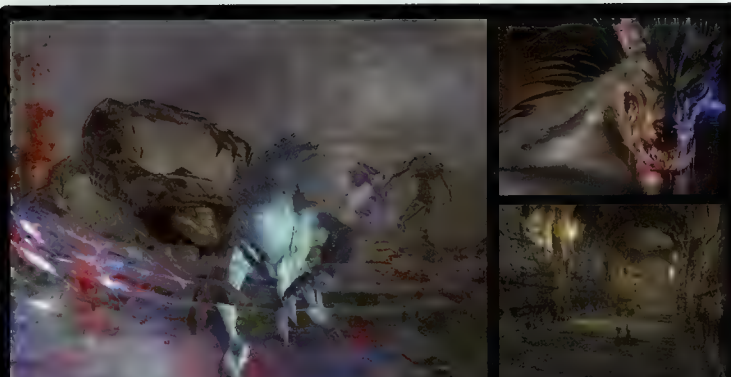
Dev: Bits Studios Pub: THQ Online: None Available: February

6.5

Score

Constantine borrows from Shadow Man, Silent Hill and especially Max Payne, resulting in a decent companion piece to the movie. There's some great detail here, like rain bouncing off JC's shoulders and an amazingly recreated version of the film's depiction of Hell, and the mixture of Payne-like shooting and spell casting is nicely brought off, complete with a sweet-looking quick turn, by-the-numbers level design and an unholy gaggle of available weapons; arms we saw little of in the film, like Dragon's Breath and the Crucifier, are front and center here. The Raziel-like parallel dimension hook works well too. Nothing Earth-shattering, but respectable, much like the film. Dave Halverson

"Nothing Earth-shattering, but respectable, much like the film."



Project Altered Beast

PlayStation 2 (Japan only)

Dev: Sega Pub: Sega Online: None Available: January

6.0

Score

Project Altered Beast isn't exactly poetry in motion, but it's a bloody good arcade-style romp. Now with backstory, we find our genetically altered hero smack-dab in the middle of a hot zone where bio chips, like the one that transforms him into a werewolf, have been introduced into the ecosystem, transforming ordinary beasts into, well, Altered Beasts. Hence, he must wade through hordes of smaller mutants, leading up to the big boss mutant, then grab the chip to gain yet another form, thus opening up more areas. The game is flat gross, in a good way—it spurts and squirts with the best of 'em as you battle and drain hordes of mutants—the boss battles are worthy of the namesake, and those wonderful transformations get a sweet next-gen makeover. Dave Halverson

"Project Altered Beast isn't exactly poetry in motion, but it's a bloody good arcade-style romp."



Robots

PlayStation 2, GC, Xbox (reviewed)

Developer: Eurocom

Publisher: VU Games

Online: None

Available: February

6.5

Score

Robots fits ever so nicely into the blockbuster movie equation as no more or less than exactly what it needs to be: a game tailor-made for casual gamers fresh off the film. Eurocom does a great job here on the visuals, and although simple collection is the theme—gathering blueprints and performing various tasks to upgrade Rodney in league with the platforming—they keep things interesting with free-look shooting, a floating pal called Wonderbot and some cool racing segues using the film's spherical Transport Pods. While you're off collecting bolts, you'll also notice a striking resemblance to Ratchet and Clank, which is evident at nearly every turn. Dave Halverson



Dynasty Warriors 5

PlayStation 2

Developer: Koei

Publisher: Koei

Online: None

Available: March

6.0

Score

By now, players already know what to expect from Koei's popular hack 'n' slash series: tons of manic action, a little strategy, ridiculously high body counts and tomes of Chinese history on which it's all based. There are, of course, a handful of new characters—48 playable in total—and somehow the developers have managed to up the number of foes and the draw distance, except in two-player mode, which is plagued by extreme pop-up and more slowdown than I've witnessed since the 8-bit era. There's still no significant camera control, and the fighting certainly still gets repetitive, but series fans probably won't mind one bit. C. Hoffman

Review Gallery

Preview

The Elder Scrolls IV Oblivion

The quest for RPG perfection

Bethesda's The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion is being designed for high-end PCs and next-gen consoles, and the developmental mandate suggests that producing anything short of "the quintessential RPG of the next generation" will not satisfy this team. If we recall the sophistication and depth of its predecessor, 2002's Morrowind, this ambitious vision might not be so lofty a goal.

In Oblivion, you'll be hunting down the heir to an empty throne, its previous monarch assassinated, in the capital province of Cyrodiil. The unfortunate side effect of no true Emperor being in power involves the gates of hell—known as Oblivion in this world—swinging wide and freeing the demons held within. To

avert mass razing of all that is good, you must fill the throne with a rightful successor and, in the process, discover the true source of the assassin...so history doesn't repeat itself. We gathered additional details from Oblivion's executive producer, Todd Howard, of Bethesda Game Studios. Mike Griffin

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

PS3 Xbox360

Point of Interest

"Radiant AI" will give NPCs incredibly adaptive behavior.

Developer: Bethesda Game Studios Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Online: None Available (US 2005)

"...producing anything short of 'the quintessential RPG of the next generation' will not satisfy this team."



Todd Howard, executive producer, Bethesda Game Studios

play: How long has Oblivion been in development and how large is the current team?

Todd Howard: It's been in development for more than two years at this point and the team right now is 45 people and growing.

Oblivion's engine looks absolutely striking. What kind of technology does it offer your world and character artists to help realize their vision of Cyrodiil and its populace?

The level of detail our artists can create now is really mind-blowing, we find that we can keep pushing it and pushing it, and it always seems like there's a new way of doing something with pixel shaders to get a specific effect you want. Almost weekly, one of our artists comes up with an even more real version of

"stone," how the light plays off it, how rough it feels in spots, and so forth. I can't even speculate where it's going to be in a few more years when we've pushed it even further.

Beyond the stunning looks, the AI life in your world is being equipped with remarkably complex behavioral and communicative abilities. What are some actual in-game instances of this powerful "Radiant AI" in action?

I have a great one from just the other day when I was testing a quest in a city. I was pushing an NPC for information, and when he wouldn't cough it up, I attacked him, and he quickly ran out of the building we were in. This was not the expected behavior for this quest, as he was supposed to stay and fight. So I pulled up some debug information to see





"I can't even speculate where it's going to be in a few more years when we've pushed it even further."

what he was doing, and he had left the building, went down the street, bought a dagger and ran back to fight me. It turns out another designer had recently finished the weapon store next door and the guy I was fighting decided to use it. Hilarious.

What sort of approach are you taking with the character creation system in Oblivion, and how diverse is character progression?

Character creation itself is really the entire first dungeon of the game: it's something you play through, so you can learn the game and see what skills you like, before you have to really make a decision. The game starts in action, which should get people into it faster. As far as player progression, there's a lot more "juice" to it this time. As you raise skills, they give you brand new actions you couldn't do before, like special combat moves or the ability to do evasive maneuvers and such.

What kind of weapons and magic will be included, and how will the combat system function?

Tons of weapons and spells...literally hundreds. And it's a good balance in that you can do both things at once so we expect players to always be mixing up their melee combat and magic into one great battle system.

The sheer amount of ancillary quest paths in Morrowind was pretty staggering, perhaps overwhelming for some. Can we expect similar side avenues with meaningful lore and progress in Oblivion? You can expect similar things, though not

as many of those, as we've really tried to keep the Oblivion quest lines a lot tighter. Morrowind tends to be all over the place as far as quests go, and with Oblivion, we want each faction or random quest to fit into a nice whole.

No limits

The level of technology that the Oblivion development team has at its disposal in next-generation consoles and PC hardware is beyond anything they could have hoped for, and it continues to expand. In addition to incredible facial animations and lip sync, future hardware allows for complex instancing of environmental foliage like trees and grass—instead of drawing upon resources to handle each asset. The next generation of pixel shaders has also allowed the team to offset large amounts of excess rendering and extraneous loading with techniques that enhance the scene and camouflage data fetching. This means major performance gains for those gorgeous visuals, extremely precise effects, and streaming that never gets noticed. And because their Radiant AI deserved appropriately dynamic interactivity with environments, Bethesda adopted a full Havok physics solution to infuse Cyrodiil with motion. Random mischief with projectiles and telekinetic powers will also benefit. And finally, a revamped construction set will offer improved control over quest design and scripting for aspiring adventure designers. Needless to say, Oblivion looks like one hell of a way to kick off next-generation RPGs.



The troll's crypt is so detailed, it almost looks tangible.

Preview

Dungeon Lords

Veteran RPG designer unsheathes his pen

D.W. Bradley has been on the RPG scene for more than 20 years. Remember the Wizardry and Might & Magic games? Yep, that's him. Bradley's development house, Heuristic Park, and partner in crime DreamCatcher are conjuring up *Dungeon Lords*, a new RPG heavily steeped in action gameplay. Their design goal is to provide plenty of familiar elements so RPG fans feel at home in this fantasy world, but with diverse action dynamics that vary depending on how you build your character.

The *Dungeon Lords* tale has two wizards from warring kingdoms facing off. Volgar manages to lure Galdryn, his opponent, into a neutralizing trap. Suddenly, the balance of power shifts in favor of Volgar's liege, and the opposing kingdom, crippled by the loss of its magical defenses, must surrender. The

defeated monarch uses his daughter as a bargaining tool to secure peace between the kingdoms. The conflict would end here, but the daughter is in love with the captain of the Royal Guard. As any brave and noble guard might do in this situation, he protests the sovereign's dubious decision. This lands the captain in jail, charged with treason. Distraught and desperate, the daughter runs away—leaving her poor royal pops with no leverage. The peace treaty is canned, and to make matters worse, the imprisoned captain's infuriated family begins to march a large force from the north, intent on war. It is at this point of entropy that you, the player, will enter the story.

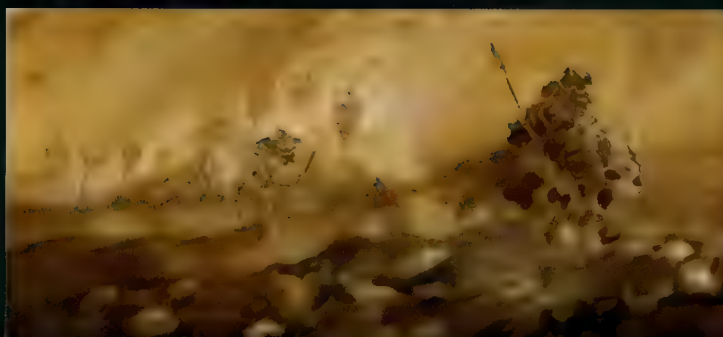
DreamCatcher producers are estimating that *DL's* main story will come in at about 40 to 50 hours of gameplay. There will be a number of optional side quests as well, providing an additional



"The geography of the game world is quite large, requiring a solid hour to travel across full stride."



D.W. Bradley will add his own demigoth races, the Thrall and Urgoth, to the cast of elves, dwarves and dragons.



10 to 20 hours of play. The geography of the game world is quite large, requiring a solid hour to travel across full stride, and you'll be able to hunt and explore on a whim. Although there is only one main plot arc and ending, character development can proceed along any number of paths that continue to build the range of combat moves at your disposal. With so many of *Dungeon Lords'* puzzle elements tied in to action sequences, building your character will certainly pay off.

One of the more exciting features that *Dungeon Lords* will offer is an eight-player cooperative mode over LAN and GameSpy. Many balance issues are still being hammered out, but internal tests are up and running and, by all accounts, it is

a brutal fracas of addictive goblin hacking that could add an enormous amount of replayability to the title.

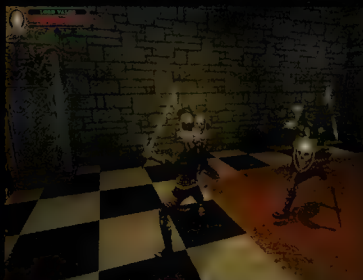
With gameplay crafted around D.W. Bradley's engrossing storyline and that tantalizing large-scale co-op mode, *Dungeon Lords* is a promising action-RPG. We're crossing our swords for the final review soon. Mike Griffin

Dungeon Lords

Point of Interest

The eight-player co-op mode sounds extremely promising.

Developer: Heuristic Park Publisher: DreamCatcher Interactive
Online: 8p co-op Available: April



Preview

Stronghold 2

Build it up and tear it down



We had an opportunity to go hands-on with a new build of Stronghold 2, and in a month where several new RTS titles were installed, SH2 once again proves why the franchise has maintained such a staunch fan base over the years. Though many conventions aren't necessarily reinvented, Firefly Studios has a certain facility with resources and sim life that makes Stronghold 2 very accessible.

The story continues from Stronghold Crusaders, as you and Sir William seek out the lost king. There will be dedicated modes for fans of military progression and other opportunities for those who might prefer the relaxed path of peace: building and nourishing towns and societies. You'll monitor the status of crime, religion, entertainment, taxes, food and more. As a rising lord, participating in many of the same activities as your lesser kin, such as attending church or responding to local emergencies, will raise your status within the game's Honor system. Honor can be seen as a type of currency, and as you improve your level of nobility through Honor more types of units might become available and ancillary estates may be acquired as the populace places greater trust in your

leadership.

Firefly realizes that a significant chunk of players who are still actively enjoying the original games—older titles that are comparatively crude in a visual sense—may be wary of having to upgrade their PC for Stronghold 2. As a result, the minimum system requirements will be very forgiving, so the chaos of dozens of armored units, thundering trebuchets and deadly burning logs will not incur a serious performance hit on fairly modest machines. The popular scenario editor has been retrofitted and enhanced inside the new 3D engine, and terrain effects and realism have dramatically improved. Archers will truly be raining death from above, and rabid swarms of spear-wielding barbarians will no longer be able to miraculously crumble entire castle walls. Mike Griffin

Stronghold 2

Point of Interest

Units will have all-new speech with rollicking medieval inflections.

Developer: Firefly Studios Publisher: Global Star/Ubisoft
Online: 8p castle defense, siege, skirmish Available: April

"...SH2 once again proves why the franchise has maintained such a staunch fan base over the years."

Preview

Act of War: Direct Action

Modern war RTS with Hollywood flair

Atari is pulling out the big production guns for Act of War: Direct Action. By including a series of live-action sequences with intense green-screen special effects, the publisher is hoping to strike a chord with surefire RTS fans and those looking for a more cinematic experience within the genre. Developer Eugen Systems has worked closely with best-selling author Dale Brown to create a gripping tale of geopolitical intrigue. A dark petrol syndicate has enlisted a globe-spanning terrorist organization to stage attacks against major cities; you're in charge of the Talon Task Force, and terrorist hunting season is open.

The world's major urban centers will take center stage in Eugen's RTS conflict, featuring extremely detailed cityscapes based on accurate satellite data. Certain major landmarks will benefit from over 100,000 polygons, and many interiors will be rendered and fully functional as fighting surfaces for troops or vehicles. All that detail makes for some intense destruction, and any building—even super-structures like Buckingham Palace—will be fair game

for massive devastation.

Beneath Act of War's big production values, we were pleased to find that many important gameplay nuances, like small interface optimizations, were also being given proper attention. Mike Griffin



Act of War: Direct Action

Point of Interest

Med-evacs will give your fallen team a second chance.

Developer: Eugen Systems Publisher: Atari
Online: 8p battle, skirmish Available: March

Preview

Empire Earth II

World domination across the ages

Most RTS titles attempt to corner one era and a handful of specific resources. Few titles in the genre, and it's far too easy to dip into hyperbole for this one, dare to go as deep as VU Games' Empire Earth II.

Empire Earth II will cover campaigns from 10,000 BC to 2200 AD across 15 epochs, from the Stone Age through the Renaissance, Industrial and Modern eras to the Digital (current) and Genetic and Synthetic future. You'll mastermind the ascension of Babylonian, Incan, Mayan, Aztec, Greek, Chinese, Turkish, Japanese, German, British, Roman and American civilizations. There will be historically accurate tie-ins, rewarding diplomacy, war or imperialist territory expansion. Gaining property requires manpower, and that's where 315 land, sea and air units come in, and you'll have 275 different building types to raise each civilization. To most sane humans, the aforementioned features would appear to be a micromanaging nightmare. Thankfully, the developers are quite lucid when it comes to troop and citizen control in Empire Earth II. They've

devised highly intuitive "hotspots" on the map and a very cool picture-in-picture system (it's about time somebody came up with this) to keep tabs on your eager human hordes. It's also all being fortified by impressive production values. Mike Griffin



Empire Earth II

Point of Interest

The crown system will award a strategic bonus for mastering each military era.

Developer: Mad Doc Software Publisher: VU Games
Online: 8p battle, cooperative scenario Available: April

Review

Star Wars Republic Commando

Cool and calculated commando action

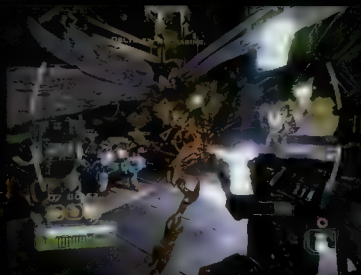
Recommended system specs

OS: Win XP	Video: 128 MB, shader capable
CPU: P4 2.0 GHz/Athlon 2400+	Sound: Dx 9.0c compatible
Mem: 512 MB	Internet: DSL/Cable

The premise of the *Star Wars Episode II to III* timeline—protagonists thrust into the maelstrom of the ongoing Clone Wars—makes for excellent gaming potential. Republic Commando brings a whole new FPS vantage point to this sci-fi conflict as you take on the role of commander of the Delta Squad, Jango Fett's divergent clone experiment. This elite four-man commando unit conducts critical missions behind the scenes of the battlefield, essential to the Republic cause.

The crux of Republic Commando's gameplay involves simplified control of the squad itself. Objects in the environment have contextual indicators

so that your hacker, demolitions and sniper squad-mates will immediately get cracking on a task with (literally) one touch of a button. This does wonders for maintaining a smooth action flow in Republic Commando, where other squad-based shooters have often suffered from cumbersome commands. At times, however, the implementation of these squad hot spots feels a bit too rigid, adding a sense of overt linearity to the pacing—sort of an exaggerated connect-the-dots brand of event sequencing. Ultimately, the level design does benefit from this one-touch squad control concept, and it allows for some really intense (and pleasantly difficult) set piece encounters that hinge upon



This Geonosian Elite takes a torch to Scorch, resulting in fried clone.



"...with periodic mini-bosses like the Dwarf Spider Droid and General Grievous' wicked MagnaGuard arriving on the scene, you will have your hands full."

intelligent use of your squad. The action is tight and your AI team usually makes good decisions in the heat of battle, including taking cover and reviving each other.

Though enemies in Republic Commando are pretty faithful re-creations of their film counterparts, more types of grunt fodder would've been nice. One can only ventilate so many Trandoshans, Geonosians and Battle Droids before it becomes slightly repetitious, even for the most ardent SW fan. Thankfully, this cast is well modeled and animated, and with periodic mini-bosses like the Dwarf Spider Droid and General Grievous' wicked MagnaGuard arriving on the scene, you will have your hands full. While most of these enemies have fairly balanced strengths and vulnerabilities, airborne opponents are ridiculously powerful—wielding beam weapons that vaporize your armor after a few seconds of sustained fire. The two aerial culprits can be eliminated pretty easily with either electro-static grenades or snipe headshots, but the fact remains that both are capable of melting you down before you can say Kenobi.

Republic Commando uses an enhanced Unreal engine, and it flexes its rendering and physics muscle with honed ease. We played with every graphical setting maxed at 1280x1024, and the frame rate remained rock-solid on our GeForce 6800 machine. The visuals and venues of the films receive

detailed representation: shimmering droid compounds, the desolate war-ravaged crags of Geonosis and the dense natural canopies of Kashyyyk. Sound effects are all completely apropos, and the Delta squad banter is simultaneously useful and entertaining. Overall, these sights and sounds frequently have a gritty vibe that matches the dogged Republic Commando attitude.

We did not have a chance to go online with SWRC before going to press (pre-release), but the CTF and Assault modes look encouraging and having Commando versus Trandoshan team battles should be cool. Based on the campaign game, and despite a few design quirks, it's easy to recommend *Star Wars: Republic Commando* to all shooter fans. Note: Be sure to play the entire way through to unlock some interesting production features. Mike Griffin

Star Wars: Republic Commando

7.5

Score

PC

⊕ Tightly focused objectives and streamlined squad control system

⊖ Occasionally needlessly and repetitively. *Audience: Best-seller*

Developer: LucasArts Publisher: LucasArts

Online: 1000 DM, 1000 KTD, Assault Available: March



Weapons of the Clone Wars



Trandoshan Shotgun
Classic short-range burst that cuts through shielding.



Wookiee Bowcaster
Light energy blaster with impaling sniper bolt secondary.

Review

Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich

RPG salvation with comic punch

Recommended system specs

OS: Win XP	Video: GeForce FX 5700 or equivalent
CPU: P4 1.8 GHz/ Athlon 1800+	Sound: DirectX compatible
Mem: 256 MB	Internet: DSL/Cable

Last year was really disappointing for pure RPGs on PC. It wasn't a dearth of quality per se; you simply couldn't find one. The genre will be making a full recovery this year, and great releases like Irrational's *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich* will make it happen. Beyond its intuitive interface and lengthy campaign, FFvTR does a fantastic job perpetuating its '60s-era comic book pseudo-satire with a self-aware wink to the audience.

It's not easy to find intelligent and sustained humor in recent games. Usually there's a tacky novelty tagged along, or just bad gameplay, and you can't take the game seriously beneath the gag facade. When a developer manages to infuse genuinely entertaining yet tactfully subtle humor with quality gameplay in a known genre, it's a good idea to play that game. *Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich*

has a funny script and excellent voice acting, often expressed with a comedic deadpan that would make Bill Murray proud. Character accents and inflections are horribly, wonderfully exaggerated and perfectly stereotyped. The plotlines are absurd and yet completely enthralling. And when all the inane and lovingly crafted comic kitsch subsides, you're left with a very good little RPG with deep character development, excellent controls and worthy map designs.

This engine isn't exactly a powerhouse, but it serves FFvTR's purposes quite well and yields appealing results. Textures have a vibrant and saturated color scheme and the art design pulls its lines and architectural highlights from comic origins to great effect. Everything in the environment is destructible, and these animations are always satisfying. Character



"...when all the inane and lovingly crafted comic kitsch subsides, you're left with a very good little RPG..."

models are fairly low poly, but it doesn't detract from these likable, low-tech, old-school superhero designs. Badasses like Tombstone and Man 'O War (who has this awesome mock-Sean Connery voice over) would be welcome in any contemporary title. The game uses crude Flash-animation style 2D slides in its character origin cutscenes, and it's a little tough, at first, to swallow just how basic these sequences are. Then you realize this is Irrational, makers of *Tribes Vengeance* and the forthcoming epic *BioShock*—these fellows have no problem producing seriously cutting-edge visuals. The 2D slide show is a conscious creative decision, captivating in that *South Park* simplicity sort of way, and with the great script and VO, each new origin story becomes a special treat to look forward to between missions.

FFvTR loses focus at times with some

reshaped mission objectives and plot lulls, but in such instances, it tends to make a huge recovery with some hilarious moment or classic boss fight. There are a couple of rousing marching tunes and generally good music, but the soundtrack is a little thin on quantity. At any rate, Irrational has nailed the comic book RPG again, and *Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich* comes highly recommended. Mike Griffin

Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich

Score

Great script and length, huge character pool, plenty of post-campaign options.

Not everyone will "get" the cutscene simplicity. Also, a few obvious pacing lulls.

Developer: Irrational Games, Publisher: VU Games

Online: Up story, deathmatch and more. Available: March

Postscript

City of Heroes adds super-powered PvP

The big news in City of Heroes' free March content expansion, aka Issue 4, is the introduction of dedicated player-versus-player arena combat. The feature was originally scheduled for introduction in City of Villains later this year, but NCsoft and Cryptic Studios are moving ahead with plans earlier than expected. We contacted CoH design lead Sean Fish to get the scoop on Issue 4.

Interview

Sean Fish, design lead, Cryptic Studios

play: Are you launching PvP in Issue 4 because of overwhelming player requests?

Sean Fish: Player-versus-player combat is something we had always intended to add to the game, but I won't deny that the players are very excited about it! Arena combat is a very popular element in massively multiplayer games and we're happy to be able to introduce it to City of Heroes.

What kind of special features can players expect in the arena zones, where are they located, and will players be able to monitor statistics?

We have Solo, Team and Super Group slugfests available to characters of all levels. Arenas are found in zones accessible to all levels of characters: in Galaxy City, Talos Island and Peregrine Island. Matches can use default rules or be customized by the players. Options include instant pick-up matches or scheduled events between teams and Super Groups. A constantly updating ranking system lets players see how their characters fare among the heroes of Paragon City. The rankings will be available in game, so that players can see where they stand and who is at the top. This will also allow players to find matches against opponents of an equal skill level. If they really want a challenge, they can go after higher ranked teams with the chance of achieving greater rewards. Winners in the Tournament Arena matches gain recognition through badges and other rewards.

How difficult has it been to balance what essentially started as a PvE-only game for full competitive PvP gameplay? Surely

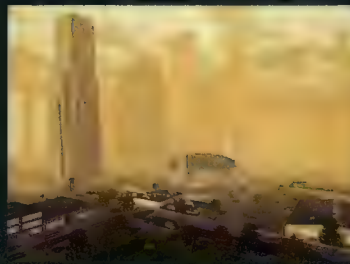
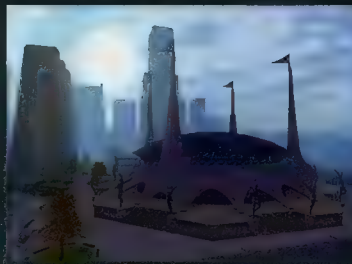


the idiosyncrasies of each character class required a little adjusting. We spent a lot of time and energy looking at how PvP will differ from PvE in City of Heroes. We realized very early on that the archetypes, power sets and powers would have different idiosyncrasies in PvP. In response, we developed as many tools as possible to change how powers work in PvP without affecting how they work in PvE. We also focused strongly on making sure the spirit of the powers carried across from PvE to PvP. Our goal, as always, is to try and provide every character build some situations where they shine. One build might be better in smaller matches, while another might perform the best in a huge Super Group battle.

Are there any plans to expand PvP again before the release of City of Villains?

City of Villains is slated for release this year. Looking at the calendar, I think it is pretty safe to say that after the Arena releases for City of Heroes, the next set of innovations and expansions to the PvP system will definitely be in City of Villains. Rest assured that City of Villains will add new dimensions to the PvP system.

Thanks, Sean. We're anxious to step into the ring with our Mutant Blaster for a little barbecue action.



Painkiller going Gold on DVD



DreamCatcher is releasing a special DVD "Gold Edition" set of its excellent Painkiller shooter this month. The package will contain the full original game, the Battle Out of Hell expansion, developer production interviews, rock band Mech's video of the PK theme, a sneak peak trailer of the Xbox version, extensive mod editing tools and documentation, and the official



Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) Painkiller competition update. If you let Painkiller slip through the cracks, this special-issue set is a great way to see (and utterly annihilate) everything you've been missing. You can't go wrong with 34 levels of old-school demon-blasting wrapped up in amazing visuals and physics.

Troika's bloodline runs dry

After seven years of game development, Troika Games closed its doors in late February due to an "...inability to secure funding for future projects." Their most recent game, Vampire the Masquerade—Bloodlines, won over the press, but the Source-powered hybrid RPG didn't conquer retail with as much fervor. Troika co-founders Leonard Boyarsky, Tim Cain and Jason Anderson were the creative force behind one of the most revered PC games of all time, Fallout, during the heyday of Interplay's success. After splitting from Interplay, Boyarsky, Cain and Anderson formed Troika Games and began production on the company's first RPG, 2001's Arcanum. Next came 2003's Temple of Elemental Evil, a popular adaptation of the old-school D&D module. Rumors say that Troika developed an extensive demo for a Fallout title that they intended to pitch to Interplay, but in the midst of its own financial crisis last year, Interplay sold off the Fallout franchise to Bethesda. It's conceivable that this costly demo's cul-de-sac, combined with lackluster sales of recent titles, ultimately pushed

Troika over into the deep end. Team members have since migrated to several other developers, including Swingin' Ape (Starcraft: Ghost) and Obsidian Entertainment (KOTOR2). Rest in peace, Troika.



NPD PC Game Sales

Week of February 6 - February 12, 2005

01. Star Wars: KOTOR II - LucasArts
02. World Of Warcraft - VU Games
03. Half-Life 2 - VU Games
04. The Sims 2 - EA
05. The Sims Deluxe - EA
06. Halo: Combat Evolved - Microsoft
07. Roller Coaster Tycoon 3 - Atari
08. MS Zoo Tycoon 2 - Microsoft
09. MS Flight Simulator 2004: Century of Flight - Microsoft
10. Galaxy of Games 350 JC - eGames

Java™ technology represents a positive experience for all who make it part of their lifestyle, making it one of the hottest software platforms in the world. Mobile phone users choose Java-powered handsets so they can play the latest games and get cool services like real-time sports scores and chat. PC buyers choose systems to get access to the widest selection of applications available. And people in the market for software know that Java-powered applications deliver the highest level of flexibility and security.

Find out why 9 million people each month visit java.com, the ultimate marketplace for Java technology. Check back here each month for the latest Java software innovations, games and technology

Top Mobile Picks

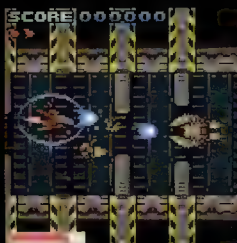
Go to java.com for prices and compatibility



Ancient Empires

Ancient Empires is an epic battle between good and evil. Strategy, planning and nerves of steel are essential in this game. Create and control your army for the final battle against the dark forces of Valadorn! Conquer castles, occupy villages or all-out attack—the choice is yours.

Publisher: MacroSpace



Alpha Wing

Your mission in this action-packed shoot-'em-up game is to locate the enemy homeworld, infiltrate the control network and destroy the central command facility. Multiple weapon types, lots of different enemies and stunning graphical surroundings make Alpha Wing one of the most captivating games of its kind!

Publisher: MacroSpace



Samurai Jack: Samurai Showdown

It's time for Samurai Jack to defeat Aku once and for all! Use special moves, magic attacks and a range of samurai weapons to dispatch Jack's enemies. Make sure you collect coins and power-ups along the way—Jack will need all his skills to win the epic final battle between good and evil.

Publisher: MacroSpace



Crash 'n' Burn Turbo

Crash 'n' Burn Turbo is petrol-soaked street racing! This mobile game lets you customize your car then race it through six different championships. Cause carnage and extreme crashes as you burn rubber around 18 different tracks. Smash and slam your opponents and leave them trailing in a cloud of nitro smoke!

Publisher: MacroSpace



Dragon Island

Take control of the axe-wielding hero in this fast and fun platform adventure game. Climb ropes, collect power-ups, dodge monsters and make your way to the legendary Dragon Island. Defeat the ancient dragon in a final showdown and restore peace to the kingdom!

Publisher: MacroSpace



Bejeweled Multiplayer

Bejeweled Multiplayer is one-on-one real-time competition on your mobile phone. Choose your opponent and enter gem-filled caves for intense head-to-head competition.

Publisher: Sony Pictures Mobile



Fatal Force

Aliens are planning to take over the Earth! The elite soldiers of the Fatal Force team are Earth's only hope. It's your mission to help the Fatal Force battle their way to the landing site and make the aliens wish they had stayed at home! This game features amazing weapons such as flame throwers, rocket launchers, lasers, grenades and more.

Publisher: MacroSpace

Desktop Adventures



Tropical Swaps

Got a few minutes? Why not hang out by a tropical lagoon and stack blocks as they fall from the sky? Swap the blocks and match the pieces in Tropical Swaps. Free the animals by completing the pictures!

Publisher: Crystal Squid Ltd.



Traffic Jammer JX

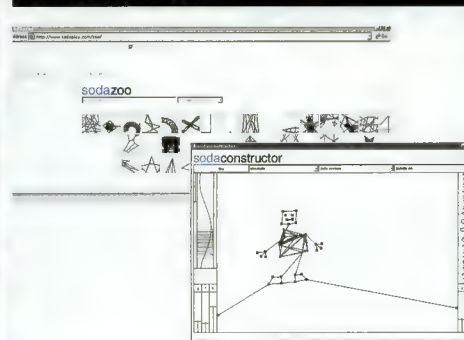
Are you up to the challenge of mapping out car routes? In Traffic Jammer JX, you can plan out a route by placing arrows at road junctions to guide cars to the correct exit. Find out if your plan works by pressing the 'GO' button and watching the cars follow your marked route. Directing traffic has never been so much fun!

Publisher: Crystal Squid Ltd.



Tech Center

sodaconstructor



sodaconstructor is an educational desktop construction kit that gives players the ability to build interactive creations using limbs and muscles. By altering physical properties like gravity, friction and speed, curiously anthropomorphic models can be made to walk, climb, wriggle, jiggle or collapse into a writhing heap. Visit the "sodazoo," where an active worldwide community of soda-players have placed a strange and diverse menagerie of models.

Publisher: Soda Creative Ltd.

Killer Desktop App

Storm Music Studio



Storm Music Studio lets you accurately emulate the universe of a real recording studio—synthesizers, effects, mixing table and more—all on your home computer! Choose virtual instruments you wish to use, then drag and drop, and in a few seconds your studio is ready—no more complicated connections and wires everywhere! You can even collaborate on your desktop using the integrated set of interactive tools and learn about new music styles using the Composition Wizard.

Publisher: ARTURIA



My DS had been gathering a layer a dust (a PSP can do that), but I quickly fell back in love with the machine thanks to Yoshi Touch & Go. This simple yet devilishly addictive touch-pen action game shows off the DS in the best possible light, providing a totally unique and fun experience. Divided between short vertical and long horizontal stages, the basic idea is to use the pen to draw clouds that will help Yoshi and Baby Mario to the goal. Enemies can be dispatched by shooting eggs at them or by drawing little circles around them and trapping them in bubbles which can be moved around into Yoshi's path. This may sound like a thin backbone for a game, but it proves so fun that I find myself picking the game up all the time. *Michael Hobbs*



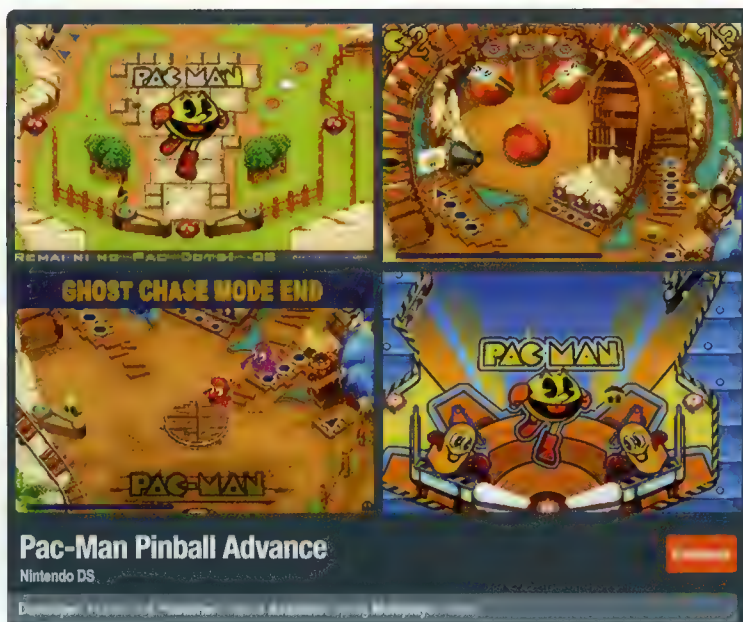
WarioWare: Touched! is the best reason yet to own a DS. Its crazy, quick, pick-up-and-play minigames are just perfectly suited for the unique DS features, whether you're ironing pants with the stylus, fogging up the screen with your breath, yanking a cow's udder, collecting coins in Super Mario Bros. by jabbing the screen or participating in any of the other attention deficit disorder-friendly diversions. As with the original WarioWare, the wacky cast keeps things interesting, and the bizarre graphic style—ranging from doodles to digitization—fits perfectly. Kudos also to the excellent sound, without which the game wouldn't hold up nearly so well. My only criticisms are that the NES-themed games aren't as creative as before, and the game is a bit easy. *Chris Hoffman*



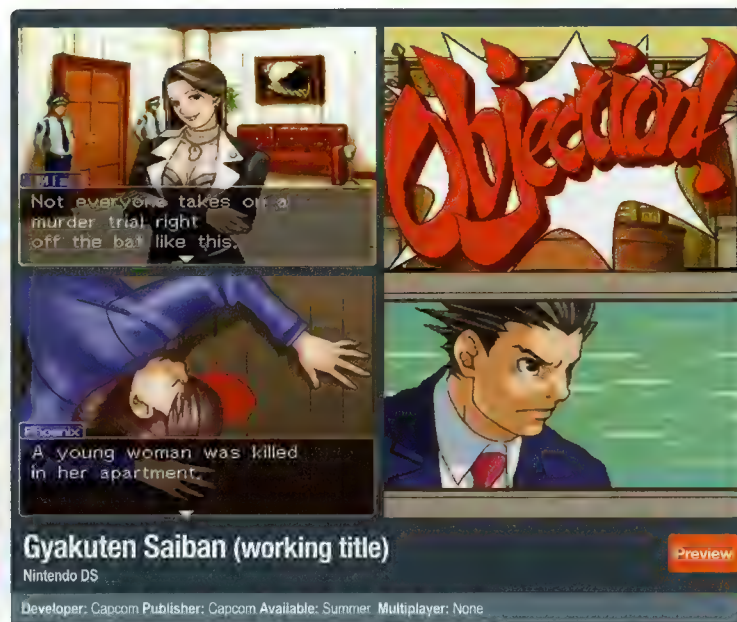
Koei's done a very nice job making a portable version of their endless Dynasty Warriors series. With an eye toward shorter play sessions and more potential interruptions, they've taken the basic gameplay formula and chopped it up into tiny pieces. You move quickly from zone to zone, with most only lasting a few minutes, as you engage in typical Dynasty Warriors mass killing. As always, it's a fairly simple affair but fun and addictive all the same to tear through scores and scores of enemies using basic combos. This version is further enhanced by the introduction of user-selectable helper characters in place of normal power-ups. These can provide more defense, health, horses and other helpful bonuses. *Michael Hobbs*



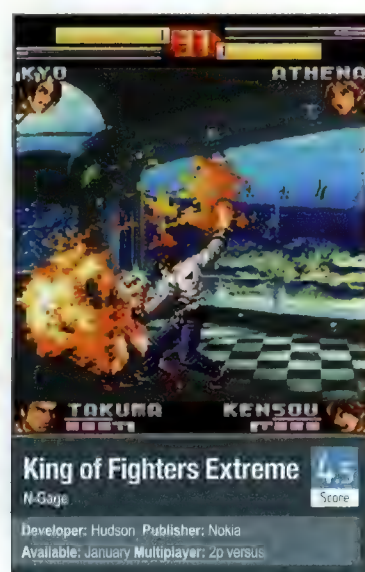
Think of Racing Gears Advance as the classic Rock & Roll Racing without the rock & roll. Featuring an eclectic mix of actual licensed cars (not that you can tell), a cast of cartoon characters, weapon enhancements and overhead RC-style driving, RGA coalesces into a pretty fun racer. The varied courses are visually detailed, but more importantly feature some impressively complex designs and plenty of shortcuts that prompt practice and mastery. The AI is aggressive, but loads of upgrades are available to give you a much-needed edge and add an element of strategy. On the downside, paying for repairs seems like an unnecessary double punishment, and the intense action cramped up my hands on the little GBA. *Chris Hoffman*



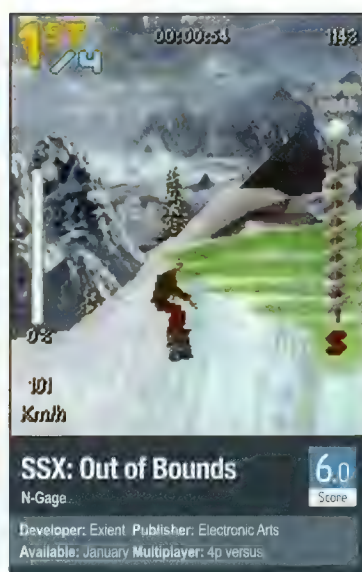
Sonic's done it, Mario's done it, those danged Pokémon have done it—heck, even Samus Aran is preparing to do it—but now it's Pac-Man's turn to make the shift from iconic video game hero to portable pinball star. Three boards will be included here—Pac-Land, Machine World and the Haunted Boardwalk—each filled with Pac-Man staples, like dots strewn about for points and power pellets that, once consumed, allow Pac-Man (who's the ball, naturally) to chomp down on a ghost or four. By entering the professor's house, players can buy power-ups like extra lives, bonus multipliers and ball savers, and in Pac-Man fashion, the ball appears in the middle of the board rather than shooting from a plunger—unique, if not totally disconcerting. **Chris Hoffman**



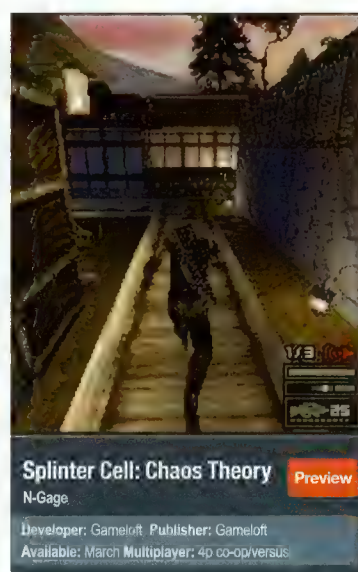
Following up three Japan-only hits on GBA, Capcom's legal-minded graphic/text adventure Gyakuten Saiban is coming to America as the series makes the jump to Nintendo DS. Though some may think that lawyers and video games don't mix, the twisting storylines and anime-style visuals of GS are looking to prove them wrong. Cast in the role of defense attorney Phoenix Wright, it's up to the player to be on the case both in and out of the courtroom, gathering evidence, investigating crime scenes, listening to testimony, examining witnesses, listening for contradictions and ultimately blowing enough holes in the opposition's argument to prove your client's innocence. If you've ever wanted to live out those Matlock fantasies, this is your chance. **Chris Hoffman**



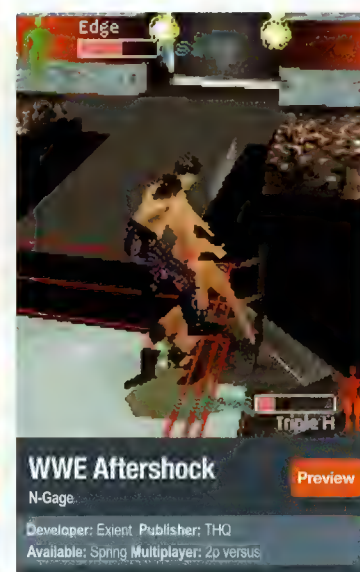
There's not much I'd consider extreme about this version of King of Fighters, but it does deliver some competent 2D fighting action that's packed with 20+ characters and all the special moves you'd expect. The game looks good and the controls are responsive, even if the N-Gage's configuration does make it hard on the hands. Choppy gameplay prevents this from scoring higher. **Chris Hoffman**



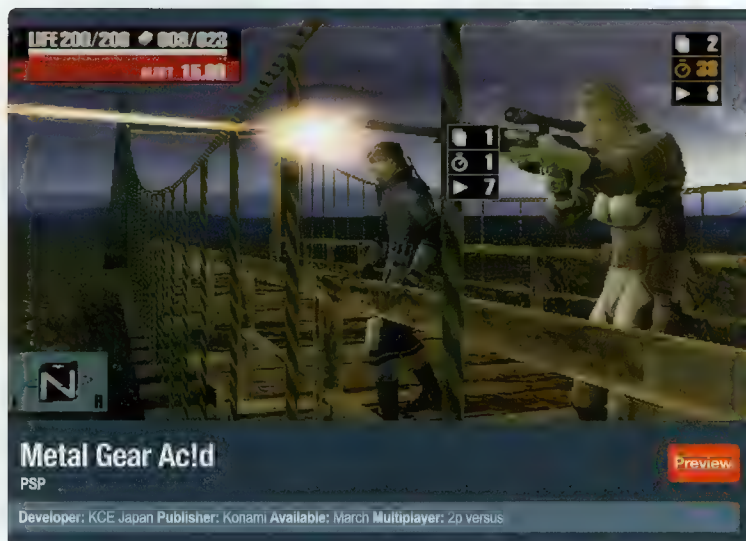
SSX has held up shockingly well on its way to the N-Gage, with well-designed, wide-open courses, plenty of customizable riders, a good assortment of unlockables and loads of crazy stunts to perform. The game is intuitive to control, and the sound is most impressive. It's too easy to get lost amidst the snowy visuals and poor frame rate, but the experience remains fun nonetheless. **Chris Hoffman**



Unlike previous portable Splinter Cell games, Chaos Theory actually retains the 3D gamescape of the console version, maintaining the series' feel while including Sam Fisher's trademark moves, weapons and gadgetry. Eight locales, ranging from North Korea to New York, will be found in the single-player adventure, and Splinter Cell's famous multiplayer mode will be included as well. **Chris Hoffman**



Recreating the pomp and spectacle of the WWE, in Aftershock, players will be able to step into the ring with 12 superstars, including Chris Benoit, Ric Flair, the Undertaker, Edge and John Cena, and engage in various match types such as the King of the Ring tournament or First Blood bouts. Dynamic camera angles and authentic superstar theme music promise to bring the action to life. **Chris Hoffman**



Metal Gear Acid

PSP

Developer: KCE Japan Publisher: Konami Available: March Multiplayer: 2p versus

Preview

Many major franchises are making their way onto the PSP, but few of them are altering their formulas as dramatically as Metal Gear is with Metal Gear Acid. Although grizzled hero Solid Snake returns and the underlying theme of tactical espionage action is still intact, the gameplay is undergoing a thorough makeover, replacing the familiar real-time stealth and combat with a more strategic, turn-based approach in which players select their actions (including movement, using weapons and equipping items) from a hand of cards. Other changes include a new South American setting, a new cast of whack-job villains, a new art style, a second playable character—female agent Teliko—and a two-player versus mode that's exclusive to the North American release. Although famed Metal Gear creator Hideo Kojima only acted in a producer/advisory capacity, it's clear from the following interview that the team was more than up to the task of taking Metal Gear into an intriguing new direction. Chris Hoffman



Interview

Shinta Nojiri, director and game designer, Metal Gear Acid

play: How long have you been involved with Metal Gear, and how did you become a part of the team?

Shinta Nojiri: My first Metal Gear experience goes back to the Game Boy game, Metal Gear Solid, which was called Ghost Babel in Japan. I was the director of that. Then I worked on Metal Gear Solid 2 as a staff member, and then that was the last Metal Gear experience I had... Then I moved on to Boktai...then, Metal Gear Acid.

I've heard that the title of Metal Gear Acid refers to "melting away" prior Metal Gear experiences. Why would you want to do that, why melt away what's come before?

While the acid is supposed to melt away the previous Metal Gears, it's not melting everything away. The core has remained. You see, if we were to melt everything away including the core, you wouldn't call this game Metal Gear Acid. It would have been something totally different. We wanted to keep the gist of...the core of [the] Metal Gear series. That's why we believe that Metal Gear Acid, although it's not an action game like its predecessors, it still is a Metal Gear game.

Are you worried that by taking out some of the action elements, you might alienate some fans?

In honesty, yes. But in Japan, there are many fans saying, "Oh, it's not an action game?" But then at the same time there are people who have started expecting something totally different. "Well, it's still Metal Gear. I'm gonna expect no less. Let's see how it goes." ...Until the game was completed and people bought the game, we weren't sure if people were going to

enjoy it, but now that the Japanese game is out and fans seem to enjoy it very much, now I can tell you with confidence that people who expected an action game will still enjoy this game.

Did you ever consider a different style of gameplay for Acid, and what made you decide to go with a strategy-type game?

While I am the director of Acid, I was also the planner, the game designer. I came up with the whole idea. The project started out as a one-man team. I was, like, the only guy on the team! And while I did exchange ideas with other people and obviously did discuss things with Mr. [Hideo] Kojima, in my mind, it was always a card-based game.

I really enjoyed Ghost Babel. Why not just make a sequel to that on PSP?

Obviously there's corporate decisions, and my personal likes and dislikes and stuff like that, but the thing is, again, it's Metal Gear Acid. We wanted to melt away what we've done before to a certain extent, and Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, Kojima's team, is known for providing surprises, so the best way of doing that is giving something totally new, so that's why we decided to go in a totally different direction. But at the same time, those fans of Metal Gear: Ghost Babel will probably enjoy Metal Gear Acid. They'll probably see some elements of Ghost Babel in it.

When does it take place? How does it fit into Metal Gear continuity?

It's a side story, so it doesn't really exactly fit in to the whole timeline, but I guess it comes after Metal Gear Solid 2. It's, like, the year 2016.

"While the acid is supposed to melt away the previous Metal Gears, it's not melting everything away. The core has remained."

What can you tell me about the new character, Teliko?

She was sent into the place on a different mission with a different team, but that mission failed majority, and everyone else is killed—she's the only survivor. And then Snake's sent in, and they were given similar missions, so they work together. The thing is, Teliko has her own secrets, which will be revealed as you play the game.

From a gameplay standpoint, why include a second playable character?

We added a second character to increase the level of strategy that the player can enjoy. For example, if you have two people, one person can lure the enemy, and the other can attack, or the two players can attack together—that's twice the firepower. Or, you know, one character can heal the other character when he or she is wounded. It just adds more depth to the whole strategy experience.

Should we expect return appearances from other key characters, like Otacon or Meryl?

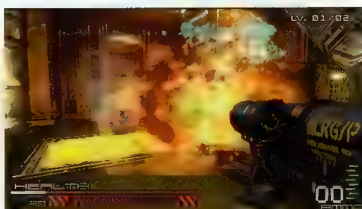
They'll only appear as faces on the Character Cards. They won't be part of the story.

About the Character Cards...what would you say the coolest summon attack is?

I think what's really cool is that there are

many Metal Gear cards, not only one or two. When you use them, you're obviously going to have major firepower, and that's really fun to watch! **play**





INTERVIEW

Yasuo Daikai, producer, Coded Arms

play: What has the development team worked on prior to Coded Arms?

Yasuo Daikai: The team—the programmers, designers—they have never worked on a major title. They've all worked on soccer and snowboarding—minor genre titles. But they're pretty talented people.

Yeah, it looks fantastic. So how long has Coded Arms been in development?

When we started this game as a PSP title, it's only been eight months.

Wow. How'd you get it to look so good with such a short dev cycle? Are you doing something that other programmers don't know about?

Well, there's no secret or trick. The team has a lot of pressure because it is the first Japanese FPS game [from Konami]...but that's why our team's very highly motivated! I guess that's the reason we have good graphics!

Does your team get to sleep?

[Laughs] They have time to sleep. We have a fairly large team working on the project.

So, why make a first-person shooter for the PSP?

There was an opinion from one of our staff [members]...who was a major FPS fan, and he said that if we did this on PSP portable hardware, it'll be a great game experience,

so that's how we started off.

But FPS games aren't that popular in Japan. Is there anything you're doing to try to increase its popularity with your native country's audience?

We didn't add anything special intended for the Japanese users, but one of the reasons we made the graphics at such a high level is just for the appeal to the Japanese users. That's one of the reasons why we have such high-level graphics.

Have you encountered any technical restrictions working on the PSP hardware?

One of the biggest issues was the controls. The limited controls—it was one of the major issues for making an FPS on PSP. We didn't know if we would succeed with an FPS on a portable system, but we had to try. The earliest version was the TGS version, the Tokyo Game Show version; that was the first build that we were actually able to play on the PSP hardware...and [from] the feedback that we've received from the TGS version, we were positive that this would be a success on the PSP platform.

Are you doing anything with a lock-on or aiming assist to offset the controls issues?

Yes, we do have an auto-aiming-aiding system, but we still haven't figured out the balance yet. Using the options screen, players can have their own settings. And



Coded Arms

PSP

Developer: KCE Studios Publisher: Konami Available: Summer Multiplayer: 4p versus

Coded Arms has the honor of going into battle not only as the first first-person shooter on PSP, but also Konami's first FPS to be developed in Japan. The developers at KCE Studios are taking advantage of their first-strike position, tapping into this popular genre with innovative elements like nearly completely randomized level design and a unique backstory of virtual space left to its own devices, not to mention some of the best visuals witnessed on PSP. More than 30 weapons and items can be "downloaded" within the game, which can then be taken into battle in the game's wireless multiplayer mode. Below, producer Yasuo Daikai discusses some of the challenges and triumphs his team faced in creating the FPS that will set the standard for all future PSP titles in the genre. *Chris Hoffman*

the auto-aiming, the whole balance has to be balanced out at the very end, when the game is further developed.

Is there anything you've especially enjoyed about working on the PSP?

...We thought the multiplayer mode, wireless, was very enjoyable. It was easy to use. We thought that was very exciting as a new feature. Playing it multiplayer with your friends will be a very new experience for the FPS multi-mode. And we're really looking forward to it.

Why set the game in a virtual world instead of in the real world?

The major element of an FPS is that it's very violent, but we wanted to soften up that aspect. That's why we made it in a virtual world... And also, for a visual effect, if this was in a virtual world, how the data disintegrates, we have a special effect we'll be able to use, compared to the real world.

Why is this conflict taking place, in terms of the story?

It might sound a little odd, but actually, the player is a hacker who snuck in to a military defensive training system...

What's the ultimate goal?

There's actually really no objective to the story, but really to test your skills—how deep you can get into levels, how many items you can achieve. Like a hacker—you

know, how deep you can go into the system...

You mentioned that a big part of the game is the random levels. Are all the levels random or are some predetermined?

All the maps are randomly generated, except for the rooms of the bosses. Everything will be randomly generated. And in multi-mode, every level will be randomly generated, but if a user finds a certain map very enjoyable, they will be able to save that and use it repeatedly.

Is there an advantage to using random levels?

[With] a portable system, my team wanted the user to have a fresh experience every time they play it. That's the main objective. We also wanted the user to have fun finding the items and weapons hidden inside the maps. That's why we made them random.

Did using random levels create any unique programming difficulties?

It was a very difficult challenge technically. These are not just like room one, two, three mixing it up, but these are very small bits making up a 3D map, so it was a very big challenge. Just recently, the system has become very stable. And also with the system, it was very hard to keep the level of graphics, the graphics not being sacrificed, that was a very difficult thing to work on. **play**

"[With] a portable system, my team wanted the user to have a fresh experience every time they play it. That's the main objective."



There's no lack of enemies, which fall into three categories: bugs, bots and soldiers.

MX vs. ATV Unleashed

There's a pot of gaming gold at the end of this rainbow

review

As much as I love them, motocross/ATV games of late have become mired in useless ancillary features (mock managers, apartments, shops, overly complex menus, money management) and, for the most part, hit the wall in terms of technology. The challenge of a true motocross game—if the technology existed—would be in mastering the ever-changing terrain, rather than rhythmic preloading; however, given the technology of the day, preloading has been the best device for balancing these amazing racers. In their final bid on this generation of consoles, Rainbow Studios has essentially closed the book by streamlining their game while mixing it up to the nth degree and closing in on hanging the balance on the terrain as much as the preloading. While preloading is still a necessary means of winning, especially in the pro ranks, mastering each progressively more amazing course is nearly as key.

Essentially, with MX vs. ATV Unleashed, Rainbow has perfected everything they

introduced as the pioneers of next generation off-road racing, and at the same time embedded enough super-cool supplementary gameplay—from planes to monster trucks to golf karts (and you're gonna love the golf karts)—to keep any speed demon glued for weeks, if not months. Not only is MX vs. ATV blessed with the best visuals thus far for an off-road racer, but the course design is by far the best I've ever experienced, eclipsing last

"Essentially, with MX vs. ATV Unleashed, Rainbow has perfected everything they introduced as the pioneers of next generation off-road racing..."



Flying the friendly skies, Rainbow-style.



year's game by incorporating more and better nuances as you progress through the ranks. Why they still feel compelled to set all of this racing bliss to mostly licensed music (sponsored by Guitar Center? Ack.) I do not understand, but I do commend them for the inclusion of a few vocal-free mixes. This being Rainbow's final assault on Xbox and PS2, what better time to catch up with the kings of racing on this and what may lie ahead? Dave Halverson

MX vs. ATV Unleashed

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Every mode and every vehicle has been honed to near-perfection and the game is simply massive overall.

Soundtrack weighed down with licensed tunes that do little more than detract from the racing.

Developer: Rainbow Studios Publisher: THQ

Online: 80 versus Available: March



Interview

Rob Baumsteiger, executive producer, Rainbow Studios

play: Motocross having consumed my youth from age 7 to 17, I waited a long time for my favorite pastime to seep into gaming offering anywhere near the real thing. After a few decent games on PS like VMX and 989's Supercross, the real epiphany came by way of ATV Offroad Fury. Do you credit that game with your meteoric rise, or did the roll begin with Motocross Madness on PC?

Rob Baumsteiger: I think that it started with Motocross Madness and grew when we launched the ATV Offroad Fury franchise.

MX vs. ATV Unleashed is an amazing accomplishment. Not only have you streamlined the format, but the level of design and animation seems amazing even by Rainbow standards. Is this one extra-special being the last on this round of consoles?

This one is special, but for other reasons. We really feel like we were able to bring the user two games in one. This game feels like a combination of all the past games in one.

Within the streamlining, you've forgone replays. Are they time-consuming, memory-gobbling?

Memory was the reason the replays were removed from the game. We wanted to add

so much to the game that we had to find some areas to cut back on.

Why no hands on the bars in bar cam? Is that something we'll see in the future?

Memory was the main reason why there are no hands on the handlebars. Yes, I think in future versions of the game you will see the hands on the handlebars. I also think that they will be moving more like they would in real life. Example: Twisting the throttle and grabbing the front brake or clutch.

You've made some true classics both on the dirt and in the water. Which do you prefer, or do you have teams that specialize in both?

I prefer dirt to be honest. I grew up racing motocross and it is still in my blood today. As for our teams, I think that answer is split down the middle on that one.

Utilizing pre-loading as a means of flow or rhythm, you guys have managed—given the technology of the day—to deliver an as-close-to-perfect experience as the current crop of platforms are able. Will the next generation of consoles allow you to add to that by cutting in lines that evolve as the race goes on?

"...a great deal of us are riders and understand what it takes to create a realistic game."

Rob Baumsteiger, executive producer, Rainbow Studios



See Rob ride! Talk about practicing what you preach! Rob goes for the holeshot while conducting "research."

I really do not want to tip our hands about the next-generation games. Let's just say that there will be some amazing things coming from Rainbow Studios.

Roger. What about mud and sand? Might they become variables on the new consoles?

It is something that we are looking into for the new consoles.

Bet you'd love to incorporate realistic shifting into the mix. Do you think shifting will ever be able to be introduced without over-complicating things? Might we see a motocross controller in the future?

We have looked into shifting a few different

times in the lifecycle of these games. So far we have not come up with a good way to incorporate them into the game without over-complicating the actual game play. As for a controller...if someone makes one that works, then we would be interested in supporting it.

I understand the need for thrash, punk and alt rock in your soundtracks (kinda), but have you ever considered racing music akin to Daytona or Ridge Racer that truly brands the game?

That would be great. Got any ideas?

On the way... It's taken a long time for anybody to nail proper body English, and MX vs. ATV nails it in nearly every respect. What's the secret to dialing it in just right? Do you run it by any pros?

The secret is...a great deal of us are riders and understand what it takes to create a realistic game. Plus, having some pro riders help out does not hurt.

You guys have been cranking out racing games for a long time. Ever get the urge to incorporate racing physics into an action game? Something like a next-generation Blaster Master?

Who knows? Maybe here in the future, Rainbow Studios will venture out into other genres.

Congratulations on one of the best off-road racing game created to date. Can't wait to see what you guys do next!

Thank you, I will make sure to pass this along to the team. They have worked their tails off to bring everyone this game and love to hear from people that feel the way that you do. play



MLB 2006

Another strong effort from Sony

review

Last year, 989 Sports surprised us with a pretty good baseball game. Not only did it have the best franchise mode around, it had great graphics and cool online components. Their latest continues this trend, and with it comes some pretty innovative gameplay additions.

Fielding the ball in particular has been improved greatly. In 2006, each player has a fielding rating, which immediately impacts how they react, catch and throw. Utilizing a new Fielding Zone Indicator—which shows the general location of where the ball is going to drop—players will be able to field the ball accordingly. For example, if a player has a high rating, the indicator will be smaller, showing a more precise location. If he has a low rating, the indicator will be larger, so there is more guesswork involved. The Fielding Zone Indicator coupled with Branch Point Technology (BPT) gives players pretty seamless fielding and throwing transitions.



In addition to the excellent franchise mode (which, among other things, now allows you to assign a secondary fielding assignment for a player), Sony has included a robust career mode. Career mode is from the player's perspective—so you start in the minors and then work your way to the Major Leagues. Every aspect of a player's career is covered, from dealing with coaches to working with trainers to improve your game. I especially liked the whole manager/teammate interaction. It was a nice touch. Tom Horn

MLB 2006 7.5
PlayStation 2 Score

Engrossing career mode and great online components

Some of the animations could use a little work.

Developer: 989 Sports Publisher: Sony
Online: Versus, 32-player tournaments Available: March



Major League Baseball 2K5

The 2K series is back to where it needs to be

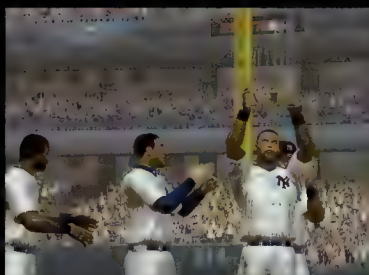
review

The coolest addition this year is, without a doubt, Owner Mode. If you've ever wanted to build your baseball empire, here's your chance. Where Dynasty Mode has you controlling your team (don't worry, it's still in the game), Owner Mode lets you deal with everything else—handling the multi-million dollar contracts, adjusting ticket prices, marketing of your team and stadium and even monitoring concession sales. Players start off with nothing, and the object is to build a successful operation in 30 years. Hardcore? Sure it is, but it's totally a blast to fiddle with.

In terms of gameplay, a notable improvement has been made to batting. The Hitter's Eye is a cool new feature that lets players pick up the pitch right when it leaves their hand. Through the use of color codes (which correspond to a particular pitch type), players can attempt to guess what pitch is going to be thrown—much

like in real life. It may sound a little complicated, but it works incredibly well during gameplay. A highly rated pitcher who has a great release and power will not be affected by the Hitter's Eye—so you really have to guess what pitch is coming your way.

Visually, MVP Baseball 2005 is top-notch. New catch and throw animations really bring out the little nuances of the



MVP Baseball 2005

This one is out of the park

review

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be affected by the Hitter's Eye—so you really have to guess what pitch is coming your way.

Visually, MVP Baseball 2005 is top-notch. New catch and throw animations really bring out the little nuances of the sport of baseball. Subtle movements, like dusting off after a slide or backhanded tosses, give MVP a very polished look and feel.

Together with a near flawless play-by-play announcer, excellent sound, music and solid online play, EA Sports has done it again with MVP. Tom Horn

MVP Baseball 2005 9.0
PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube Score

Tronically deep Owner Mode will have you occupied for weeks

Would've liked to have seen more online integration into the single-player game.

Developer: EA Gameworks Publisher: Electronic Arts
Online: Versus, tournaments (PS2, Xbox) Available: February



sport of baseball. Subtle movements, like dusting off after a slide or backhanded tosses, give MVP a very polished look and feel.

Together with a near flawless play-by-play announcer, excellent sound, music and solid online play, EA Sports has done it again with MVP. Tom Horn

Major League Baseball 2K5 8.0
PlayStation 2, Xbox Score

A plethora of options and features—there is so much to do here. And the price!

Some of the AI is questionable.

Developer: Visual Concepts Publisher: Take 2 Interactive
Online: Versus, leagues, tournaments Available: February



Fight Night Round 2

If you're not a boxing fan, Round 2 will convert you

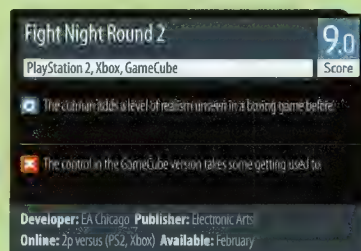
review

EA has created a monster. Sure, they got Madden, but the old man better watch his back—Fight Night is poised to be the next great EA Sports franchise. No joke. In terms of innovation, depth and presentation, it already has Madden beat. Even if you're not a fan of boxing, it has all of the elements of a brilliant sports game, and the latest is poetry in motion.

What I appreciate most about Round 2 is that the developers didn't rest on their laurels. With the newly added EA Sports Haymaker, players can, on the fly, charge up either an uppercut or hook and unleash it on their opponent for a devastating blow. This evens up the playing field quite a bit. Just when you think you've beaten your opponent—BAM!—he comes back with a Haymaker blow that knocks you on your ass.

Career mode has been revamped as well, with the addition of trainers and cutmen adding to the realism of it all, but the crowning achievement of Round 2 are

the visuals. The developers have doubled the amount of polys and textures to give players some of the most detailed facial animations ever seen. Players wince in pain. You can actually see the damage you're causing in real-time. Even blood and sweat drip more realistically. Incredible rag doll physics showcase spectacular knockdowns—complete with twitching body parts after you knock them out. EA Chicago should be proud. It doesn't get much better than this. Tom Horn



"Players wince in pain. You can actually see the damage you're causing in real-time."

Blood, sweat and tears, baby. That is what boxing is all about.

Winning Eleven 8 International

With incredible gameplay like this, who needs to go outside?

review

What I like most about Winning Eleven 8 (and the whole series for that matter) is how the game manages to convey the beauty and complexity of the sport of soccer while at the same time making it accessible to anyone who is lucky enough to pick up a controller. Instead of trying to think of a new ball-

handling mechanic or touch of the ball, the developers instead concentrate on fundamentals—ball handling, strategy, tactics—and improving those facets on a continual basis with each iteration. Winning Eleven 8 is a culmination of all that we love about the game and more.

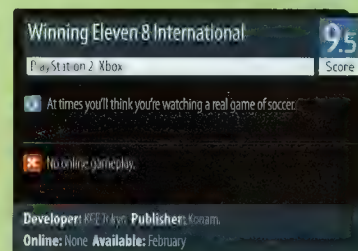
The star of Winning Eleven 8 is the gameplay. You'll immediately notice how much faster the players move on the field. Player animations and transitions are seamless; it will astound you how versatile the movements are in the game. Coupled with the best AI in the business (each player in the game is rated on a scale of 1-100 on over 35 different attributes and 23 specialized skill sets), what you end up with is AI that is smarter than you and will school you any chance it gets.

When you bring it all together—the graphics, the sound, the control and gameplay—Winning Eleven 8 is, without question, the best soccer game ever created. And now with it being on Xbox as well as PS2, there is no reason why everyone shouldn't experience this brilliant piece of work. Tom Horn



Bodies clashing, elbows in your face—this is the real deal.

"Player animations and transitions are seamless; it will astound you how versatile the movements are in the game."



REVIEW

Sell by date: infinity

2D sprites merged with 3D backgrounds: min-mm good!



Strider 2

All sons of old gods...die!

System: PlayStation
Developer: Capcom

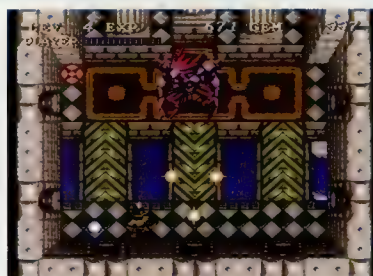
Publisher: Capcom
Released: 2000

In my book, Strider's Hiryu is one of only a handful (at best) of male leads comparable to Symphony of the Night's Alucard. After what seemed like an eternal wait for the Genesis version of the arcade game, anticipation of the true sequel was second only to that of Ninja Gaiden, but when it arrived, was it ever glorious... Flawed—in the sense that it brought with it unlimited continues right to the same spot—but glorious. When 2D sprites get together with 3D backgrounds, the result can only be summed up as magical. As great as the games of today are, playing Strider 2 washes the lower echelons of 3D away into a trembling heap of wannabes. Sliding, hanging, jumping, climbing, dashing, double-jumping and flicking his Cipher light sword, the 2D-framed-in-3D combo of Capcom's unsurpassed hand-drawn style with 3D elements is like a sermon on what might have been—the direction things seemed to be heading before games of this

brilliant nature disappeared forever, leaving no substitute. Packaged with a pixel-perfect arcade version of the original Strider also blessed with unlimited continues (which, having had the pleasure of mastering it before, is indeed a blessing), Strider 2 stands as one of the most memorable 2D compilations of all time. Dave Halverson

“...Strider 2 washes the lower echelons of 3D away into a trembling heap...”

The St. Ellis Seabed...where you'll drown without the right armor.



Soul Blazer

Action-RPG for the soul

System: Super Nintendo
Developer: Quintet

Publisher: Enix
Released: 1992

I'll never forget the first day that one of my friends and I were playing Enix's Soul Blazer. We had finished the first area, Grass Valley, making short work of the Metal Mantis boss, then had proceeded to GreenWood, clearing the enemies from the Lostside Marsh and nearby temples, restoring the village to its lively but peaceful state. As I spoke to the animal villagers, one of them asked me if I wanted to know what was on the day's menu, which I replied to in the affirmative. Suddenly the music dropped out, leaving only stunned silence as I was hit with his harsh response: "You!" My friend and I were in shock. Had we come this far, carelessly forgetting to save, only to have our game come to an abrupt end at the stomach of a dog whom I had just rescued? As I was preparing for the worst, the canine...told me not to be offended and that he was only kidding. The music returned and I hurriedly saved the game; it was great. Unforgettable moments like this—along with the thrill of

rebuilding a fallen world, the simple but perfectly balanced top-down combat, the varied magic powers and soul abilities, the entrancing music, the poignant messages embedded within its bittersweet story of greed and sacrifice—are among the reasons why Soul Blazer holds a permanent place in my action-RPG pantheon. Chris Hoffman

“The music returned and I hurriedly saved the game; it was great.”



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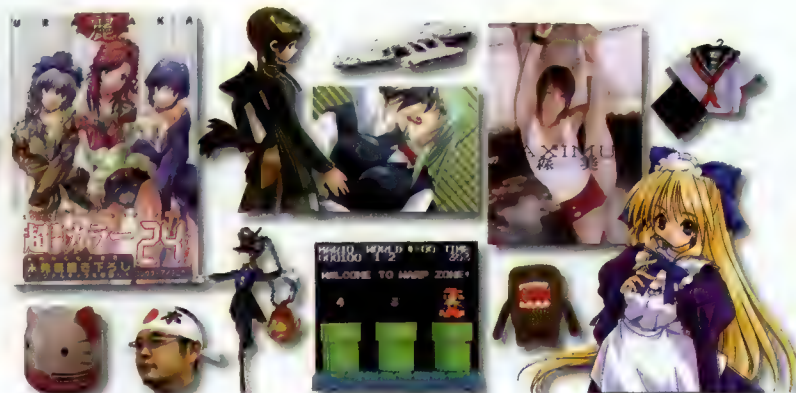
Dirty American Devil. During World War II, the Japanese word for Americans soldiers was *Kichiku Beihei* or "Dirty American Devil." Just about the most bizarre message we could think of for a T-shirt. It looks great!



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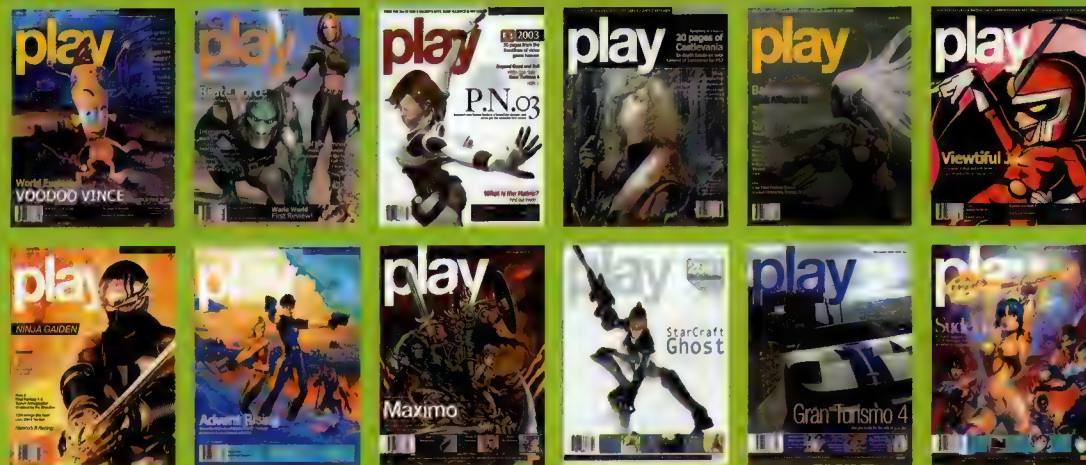
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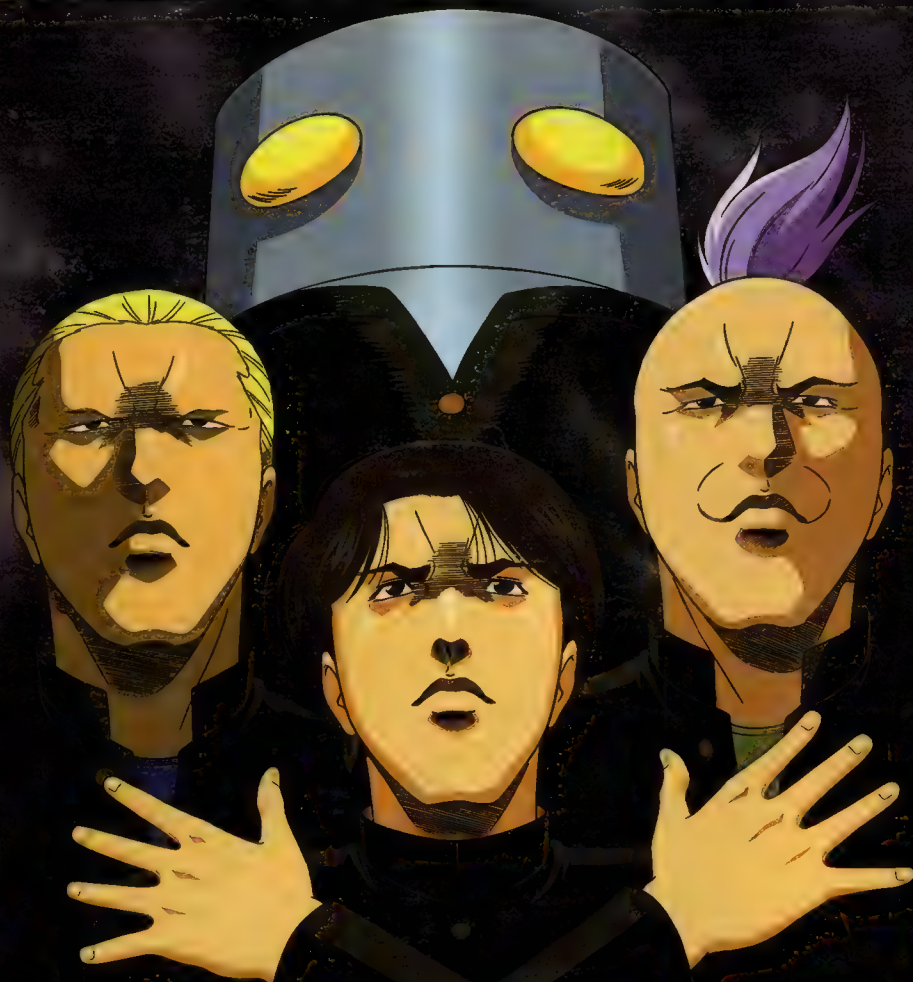
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play anime



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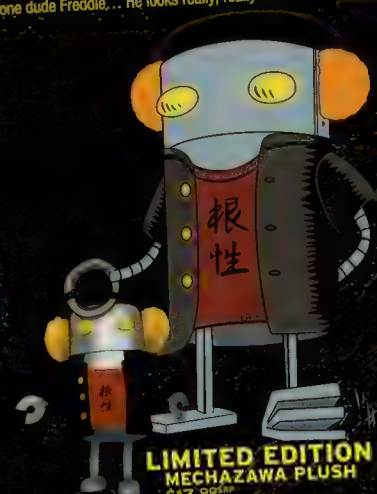
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"After all, if the people flee the city, who will buy all the booze...?"

It should come as no surprise that, in the distant future, mankind has been forced into Domed Cities (called Domeopolises) due to the obliteration of the environment to the extent that it's uninhabitable, or so we're led to believe. It also should come as no surprise that they are owned and operated by huge corporations (anime can be so very prophetic). Of course, that doesn't mean everybody has to like. Within one ostensibly upbeat yet tightly controlled Siberian metropolis, a rebel faction, Exodus, is about to make its move (as in a break for it)...as soon as they find an unassuming and highly skilled young pilot and a giant robot. Enter virtual video game champion Gainer Sanga. Having been wrongfully accused of being an Exodus sympathizer, Gainer meets his ill-fated fate in jail, as he opts to escape with fellow detainee Gain Bijou, whom he takes as an innocent like himself. Soon after helping Gain hijack a powerful Overman assault suit (that would be step two in the plan) that resembles a cross between a Boomer (industrial mech) and a giant four-eared rabbit, Gainer comes to realize he's inadvertently not only become a part of the resistance but wingman for its head mercenary! D'oh! No more video games

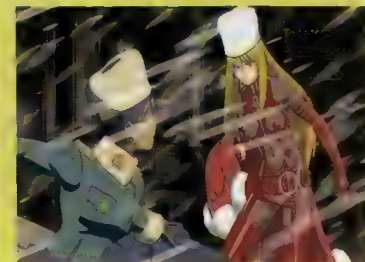
for him. Meanwhile, the significant powers that be take chase as the Siberian Railway Patrol, headed by the über-nasty Yassaba and his Overman Rush Rod, wage their own private war against the rebel faction. After all, if the people flee the city, who will buy all the booze and merchandise they carry into the Dome on their rails? The princess wanting to tag along as a willing hostage doesn't help matters much, nor does the fact that Gainer is more than a little pissed off about being used as bait (he's not a big fan of Exodus), but hey, that's what a great series is made of: discomfort! As these types of action/giant robot sagas go, *OKG* stands out as one of the more unique, looking more like *The*

Fifth Element in design than conventional neo-Tokyo-type sci-fi, along with some truly inspired mecha and vehicle design and enough hot girl action to keep our eyes peeled for the duration.

Dave Halverson

Overman King Gainer		9.0
"Exodus 1" - Volume 1		Score
<p> Excellent mecha and vehicle designs, cool architecture and a fresh vision of the future for a change.</p> <p> Fairly predictable at the outset, although I sense this will be short-lived.</p>		
<p>Released by: Bandai Entertainment Rating: 13 and up Running Time: 745 minutes Available: 1/1/05</p>		

The Princess tagging along as a willing hostage really sets the tone.



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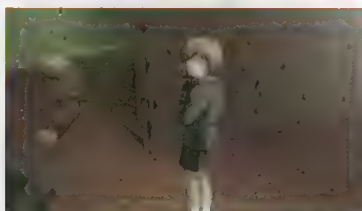
GOD(?) SAVE OUR KING!



Gunslinger Girl

Girls in armor

"Sure, they're alive, but would they be better off dead?"



Henrietta innocently looks to her handler after going ballistic.

Gunslinger Girl's haunting opening theme "The Light Before We Land," along with the equally evocative visual, actually gave me chills, and that's before I ever partook in this most bittersweet of sci-fi dramas. I played the game but had no idea the effect the series would have on me. We know from *Evangelion* how profound and unsettling watching children placed in extraordinary circumstances (in a dramatic sense) can be, but here it is especially disconcerting, if not utterly captivating. Set in a startling recreation of Italy (Madhouse has outdone themselves yet again), *Gunslinger Girl* has deservedly garnered comparison to *Le Femme Nikita*, *The Professional* and *Point of No Return* but given it's rooted in gross abnormalities concerning children, it hits home as powerfully as all three combined. Based on the direst of tragedies—terminally ill or traumatized little girls—the Social Welfare Agency is in the business of wiping their minds clean

or reprogramming them, fitting them with cybernetic implants and sending them off to do the government's (very) dirty work as seemingly delicate little assassins. How do you treat a child that walks, talks and thinks like a little girl but harnesses a trigger that can send her into a surgical killing spree? That is the question we must ponder early on as we meet Henrietta, freshly reprogrammed after witnessing the slaughter of her family. Each girl is assigned a handler to bring them through the process and rate their development, forming teams called "Fratello" (Italian for "sibling"). The initial episode sets the scene in the field and at the agency level as Henrietta and her handler Jose develop their peculiar bond. As special a little girl she is, within the first act, her cybernetic makeup coupled with remnants of her adolescent mind manifest themselves in a gunfight that can only be described as a religious experience, in which we are introduced to the conundrum of these little



girls' bittersweet existence. Sure, they're alive, but would they be better off dead? Soon after, Rico, the second girl we meet, is confronted with the unthinkable (as in turn are we) as this mesmerizing first volume comes to a close. As the series progresses, we'll come to know all of the Fratello as we explore the compelling dynamic of tragedy met with more tragedy as seen through the hopeful eyes of little girls programmed and licensed to kill. Dave Halverson



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Gravion Zwei

Power Rangers for grown-ups!

While the Sandman is away, the Gran Knights (well, one at least) will play, that being Eiji as he bets the maids (and Sandman's maids are really anything but) a day of the knight's servitude when he finds himself down to the skivvies in a game of strip Mahjong. Soon after, their involuntary (and severely unappreciated) dose of how the other half lives comes to an abrupt halt when more pressing matters—like the Zeravire attacking—rear their ugly, metal heads, springing the knights into action to back the EDF's (Earth Defense Forces) piddly G-Squadron offensive. With the mighty battle cry of "Awaken super heavyweight god! Become the fang which crushes the sinister evil!" the Gran Divas come together like a pimped-out Megazord: Eiji in the G-Attacker, the massive-breasted Mizuki in the G-Striker, Ms. Luna and Ena in the

G-Driller and the prodigal son Toga in the Gran Kaiser, together forming Gravion, the most powerful and pompous-looking fighting fortress in all the world.

Klein Sandman's band of bodacious girls and hotty guy pilots, hand groomed and/or picked for extremely active duty, live and play out their own private soap opera among Sandman's lavish HQ, the colossal Saint Germain Castle, as members of Earthgertz, the secret society of justice that protects the world. While the ruling class are suspicious of Klein to say the least, they are, to an extent, at his mercy, seeing as how he and he alone houses the only giant robot capable of beating down Earth's invaders...until now...or so they hope. In this follow-up series (which looks a measure better than the first, which was no slouch; this is a beautiful show), Klein seems destined to

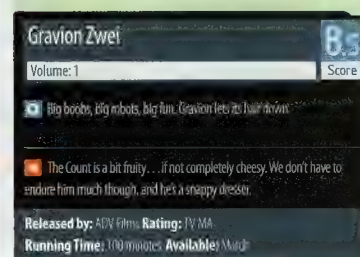
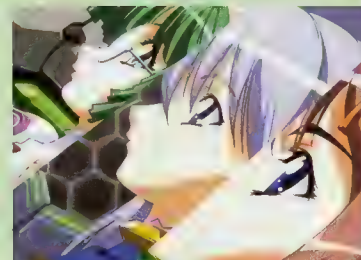
"Awaken super heavyweight god! Become the fang which crushes the sinister evil!"



Gravion Zwei is one of the most beautiful sci-fi epics around.



face an even greater foe than the Zeravire armada in the form of the new G-Squadron and those who seek to expose him as... 18th-century Count Saint Germain—time traveler?! I knew there was something weird about him! Between the pratfalls of castle life, now that the Knights are situated, the insane battles, hot springs (you knew it had to happen) and this latest twist, *Gravion Zwei* is go! Dave Halverson



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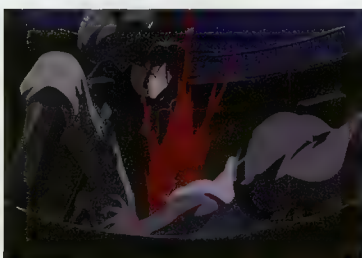
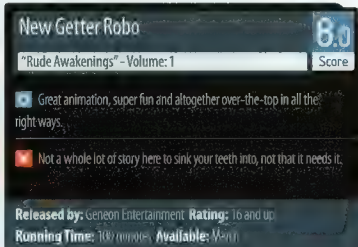
New Getter Robo

Synchronized insanity



New *Getter Robo* is as in-your-face as animated action gets—a bloody, over-the-top action extravaganza hung on the most rudimentary of devices as to not distract us from what's important: spurting bodily fluids, hyper violence, dysfunctional freaks and, of course, gigantic robots kicking the living crap out of each other! The irrepressible Professor Saotome is driven to create the world's most powerful fighting robot, or Getter as he calls it, I suppose to protect the planet, although it seems to be in no immediate peril. The only hitch is in finding three pilots mentally tough (or nuts) enough to pilot it, as it pretty much melts down ordinary humans. Enter Rymoa Nagare, master fighter, Hayato Jin, certifiable madman, and Benkei Musashibou, a rotund, reformed Buddhist with a propensity for falling asleep and blowing snot bubbles at the drop of a hat...or imminent death. If they don't kill each other (or worse), they will surely beat down the opposition. Not to say that the series' resident demon horde is ill-equipped; not to be reserved

or outdone by simple robot-on-robot action, the Oni (that'd be the bad guys, not the game Bungie did before Halo) is composed of smaller, zombie-like demons (with nice soft heads for squishing) who, in defeat, sound the horn, summoning from the heavens massive behemoths that would make any evil genius fluorescent green with envy. Other than that, let the goo fly and just sit back and watch the body count rise. If you liked the first *Getter* you'll love *New Getter*, and if you're new to the series, well, just hold on tight. This is Go Nagai at its finest. Dave Halverson



Rymoa takes aim at a massive Oni mechanoid.

"...let the goo fly and just sit back and watch the body count rise."



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Tokyo Underground

Unearthed and loving it

Here's a novel idea: Deep (way, way deep) under Tokyo, through an abandoned subway and waaaaay down a small hole lies a sunless city within the crust of the Earth called, appropriately, "Tokyo Underground." If this has already taken you back to that shining beacon of video game movies that is *Super Mario Bros.*...welcome! *Tokyo Underground* is a lot like that...only without the really pissed off dinosaur-people. Rather, the underground's "Maiden of Life," one Ruri Sarasa and her trusty female bodyguard, Chelsea Rorec, make a break for the real world and end up wreaking havoc on poor Rumina Asagi's perfect high school life. They also awaken his dormant wind

powers and gain him as a sworn ally to the cause of protecting Ruri from evil and keeping her under the sun...but not after a whole bunch of weirdness. Dave Halverson

Tokyo Underground

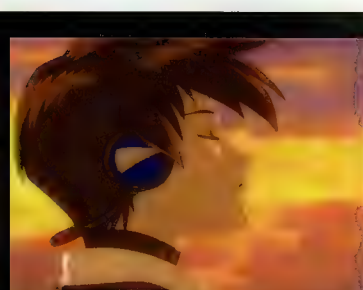
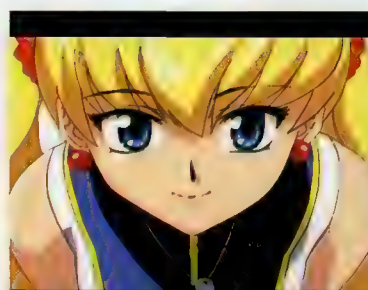
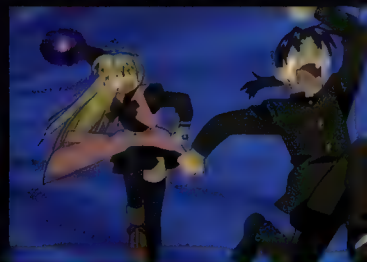
Score

Doesn't take itself too seriously, which is good given the premise. Nice writing too, and nice and glossy looking.

Just not all that compelling to keep you glued. V2 needs to represent.

Released by: Geneon Entertainment Rating: 13 and up
Running Time: 125 minutes Available: February

"...Underground is a lot like that...only without the really pissed off dinosaur-people."



E's Otherwise

Psychic Forces on the rise

Like a cross between X-Men and Psychic Force, *E's Otherwise* takes place in a future where, after a devastating war, 12 corporations control the world, one of which is Ashrum: an organization of Extra Sensory Specialists who police and protect the growing number of psychics in the world known as "E's" or "metahumans," a special breed of psychics able to transform thought into energy. Looked down upon in society much like the mutants Professor Xavier serves and protects, Ashrum is composed of the world's most powerful E's, formed to help maintain law and order among the psychic population, or so it would seem. It's pretty apparent early on that there's much more to Ashrum than meets the eye, if not the entire new world order. We see it

all from the perspective of Kai, an average recruit brought to Ashrum's forces due to his sickly little sister, who harnesses some of the greatest psychic potential anyone has ever seen. *E's Otherwise* takes a while to get going, but the twists come fast, thereafter the plot simmers to a boil by volume's end. Dave Halverson

E's Otherwise

Score

Gotta love the brother-sister duo of Shen-Ion and Shen-Iu. Should be their show.

Kai's a frustrating lead character and I feel like I've been down this road. Definitely promising though as things push on.

Released by: ADV Films Rating: 13 and up
Running Time: 125 minutes Available: February



Eiken

Wayward watermelons

Oh, *Eiken*...where do I begin with *Eiken*? How about with the gargantuan mammaries hanging off of young girls like beach-ball-sized water balloons? I mean, I can understand a little boob fetish sneaking into a show now and again, but this is beyond ridiculous. What's even weirder is that it's applied to a superlative-looking OVA. So what's it all about? What else? One lone, kinda dorky guy thrown into the middle of a whole gaggle of massively breasted women (The Eiken Club) amidst a school campus the size of LA. Some want to ogle him and some like to rest their massive breasts and ample camel toes on him,

while it's all he can do to completely alienate (purely accidentally, of course) the one he truly desires: the shy, reserved and ever-so-gigantic-breasted Chiharu. Weird! Dave Halverson

Eiken

Score

Great animation, toilet humor funny, comically mischievous breasts.

Great animation washed on toilet humor funny and comically mischievous breasts.

Released by: Media Blasters Rating: 16 and up
Running Time: 60 minutes Available: January

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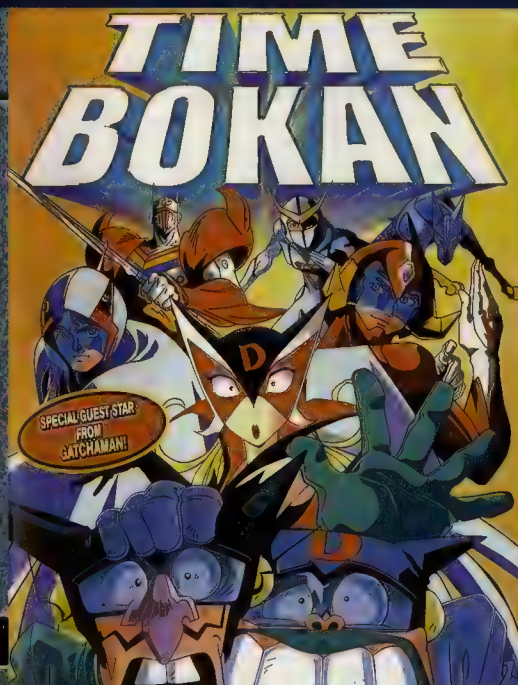


Gromartie High School

Released by: ADV Films

Now Playing: Volume 1 (also available w/box)

Who cares that an entire volume has less animation than an episode of *South Park*? *Cromartie* is genius in its surreal depiction of high school life. An entire episode dedicated to when you have a song in your head but can't think of who sings it... Trust us, you need this.



Time Boker

Released by: Central Park Media

Now Playing: OVA

Crave a bit of '70s-ish evil-on-evil, *Wacky Racers*-style, with modern-day glimmer and a special appearance by Gatchamani? Of course you do! CPM's *Time Bokan*, from the studio behind *Speed Racer*, is an absolute must-see for both casual and retro anime fans.



Released by: ADV Films

Now Playing: Volume 1 (also available w/box)

The Sanzo group continues their pilgrimage to East India to restore peace to Shangri-la, or at least that's the plan. As usual, nothing goes as planned, and demons come out of the woodwork. Not as polished (or well-voiced) as the original series, but nearly as wild and funny.

read this

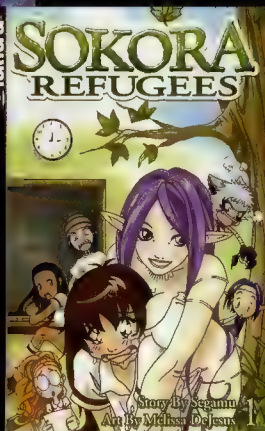


Warcraft:
The Sunwell Trilogy

Publisher: TokyoPop

Now Reading: "Dragon Hunt"

At long last, the first volume of Warcraft is available. Written by New York Times best-selling author Richard Knaak and illustrated by the King of Hell series' Jae-Hwan Kim, TokyoPop has delivered a stunning companion to the games' exalted lineage.



Sokora Refugee

Publisher: TokyoPop

Now Reading: Volume 1

Sokora Refugees is a unique manga about an elfin rebellion to liberate an elfin homeworld from demonic invaders...with a twist: Their notoriously lazy heroine is forced to time-share her body with an unnaturally powerful (and big-breasted) sorceress.



FullMetal Alchemist

Released by: FUNimation

Now Playing: Volume 1

Whether or not you've caught the exploits of Edward and Alphonse Elric on TV, you'll need the DVD to take in the deleted scenes (such as excessive blood) and the different opening themes. Plus, it's FullMetal. You gotta have it.



Kekko Kamen

Released by: ADV Films

Now Playing: OVA

She's Kekkō Kamen, the denuded damsel who fights injustice in the altogether, and yes, she's nude all the time. Took ADV long enough to dig her up, but alas, here she is again, in the flesh and only the flesh.

animedatabase

Virgin Megastore Top Ten

- 01 **The Cat Returns** buena vista home entertainment
- 02 **Porco Rosso** buena vista home entertainment
- 03 **Nausicaä** buena vista home entertainment
- 04 **Zone of the Enders** adv films
- 05 **Wolf's Rain** bandai entertainment
- 06 **Gundam SEED** bandai entertainment
- 07 **Samurai Champloo** geneon entertainment
- 08 **Peace Maker** geneon entertainment
- 09 **Fist of the North Star** adv films
- 10 **Ghost in the Shell: SE** manga entertainment



Play Magazine Top Ten

- 01 **Gunslinger Girl** funimation productions
- 02 **FullMetal Alchemist** funimation productions
- 03 **Appleseed** geneon entertainment
- 04 **Overman King Gainer** bandai entertainment
- 05 **New Getter Robo** geneon entertainment
- 06 **Ghost in the Shell: SAC** manga/bandai entertainment
- 07 **A Tree of Palme** adv films
- 08 **Paranoia Agent** geneon entertainment
- 09 **Gravion Zwei** adv films
- 10 **Gantz** adv films



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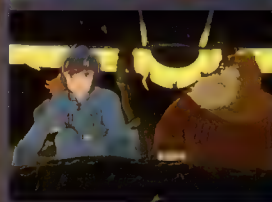


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Porco Rosso
buena vista

For the first time ever on DVD, now featuring Cary Elwes and David Ogden Stiers. And you thought pigs couldn't fly...



Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind
buena vista

One of Ghibli's most magical films, starring Uma Thurman, Patrick Stewart, Shia LaBeouf & Edward James Olmos.

Dave Halverson

- 01 **Gunslinger Girl** funimation productions
- 02 **Burst Angel** funimation productions
- 03 **FullMetal Alchemist** funimation productions
- 04 **Overman King Gainer** bandai entertainment
- 05 **Appleseed** geneon entertainment



Bandai's Jerry Chu

- 01 **Slam Dunk** geneon entertainment
- 02 **Ghost in the Shell: SAC** manga/bandai entertainment
- 03 **Azumanga Daioh** adv films
- 04 **Wolf's Rain** bandai entertainment
- 05 **FullMetal Alchemist** funimation entertainment



Nelson Lui

- 01 **Gunslinger Girl** funimation productions
- 02 **Cromartie High** adv films
- 03 **Samurai Champloo** geneon entertainment
- 04 **FullMetal Alchemist** funimation productions
- 05 **Koi Kaze** geneon entertainment



Readers' Anime Top Five

- 01 **FullMetal Alchemist** funimation productions
- 02 **Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence** dreamworks
- 03 **Gundam SEED** bandai entertainment
- 04 **Ghost in the Shell: SAC** manga/bandai entertainment
- 05 **Wolf's Rain** bandai entertainment

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

- 01 **Warcraft** tokyopop manga
- 02 **Sokora Refugees** tokyopop manga
- 03 **Sgt. Frog v6** tokyopop manga
- 04 **Et Cetera v3** tokyopop manga
- 05 **Gundam SEED: Astray v1** tokyopop manga

Play Magazine Music Top Five

- 01 **Refrain of Evangelion** geneon anime music
- 02 **Gungrave OST** geneon anime music
- 03 **Memories** geneon anime music
- 04 **Sound Wave of Stellvia** geneon anime music
- 05 **Sonic Heroes OST** geneon anime music

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The Incredibles

Starring: Craig T. Nelson, Holly Hunter, Jason Lee

Director: Brad Bird

Released By: Buena Vista

Rated: PG



The Incredibles isn't just a great animated feature, it's great filmmaking—a thrilling, hilarious, smart and endlessly inventive take on the classic superhero tale. Pixar has raised the bar yet again, and this time, their playful magic is cast straight into the hearts of adults; the subtle jokes are mature and clever, playing off everything from male inadequacies and dysfunctional family bonding to midlife crises and suburban quirks. The setup: Bob Parr is working dad by profession, superhero Mr. Incredible by hobby. Bob's forced to retire his tights when lawsuits start building around his destructive exploits. His spirit diminishing and his waistline ballooning, Bob's ripped out of retirement, off to lay

the smack down on his arch-nemesis, Syndrome. One wild scene after another ensues, each seemingly outdoing the last in wonder and excitement—the visual freedom of animation brings a new energy to the possibilities of an action scene. As the movie soars to its dynamite climax, the whole family gets involved in the superhero game, putting a final stamp on the message of values and struggles that build throughout the film. *The Incredibles* leaves your eyes and heart completely floored. Extras: Two separate commentaries with a number of talent, animated shorts *Jack-Jack Attack* and *Boundin*, deleted scenes, alternate opening, making-of... B. Flechter
Movie: A Extras: A



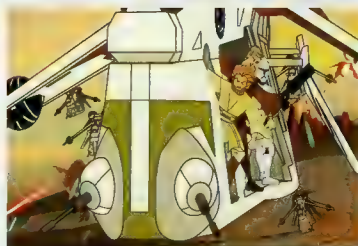
Star Wars: Clone Wars Vol. 1

Starring: Mat Lucas, James Arnold Taylor, Tom Kane, Anthony Daniels, Tom D'Maggio (voices)

Director: Genndy Tartakovsky

Released By: 20th Century Fox

Rated: G



The best reason to fall in love with *Star Wars* all over again since *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Clone Wars* is an extraordinary work of animation. Bridging the gap between episodes II and III, feast your eyes on 60 minutes of vivid, seamlessly integrated traditional animation and CG, astounding THX sound and superb voice work, not to mention a first look at the new menace from *Episode III*, General Grievous. If only they'd apply this art style to *Knights of the Old Republic*, the Force would truly be with us. Extras: Bridging the Saga: From *Clone Wars* to *Revenge of the Sith* featurette, behind-the-scenes, two director's commentaries, two galleries, an *Episode III* teaser and a playable level of *Star Wars*: Republic Commando! George even lets on that *Clone Wars* was anime inspired, but that still doesn't explain *Howard the Duck*. Dave Halverson
Movie: A Extras: B+

South Park: The Complete Fifth Season

Starring: Kyle, Stan, Cartman, Kenny, Timmy, Butters, Jesus Christ, David Blaine, Osama Bin Laden

Created by: Trey Parker, Matt Stone

Released By: Comedy Central/Paramount Home Entertainment

Rated: Mature



Talk about your great moments in American history. Who can ever forget "Cripple Fight," when Big Gay Al gets canned from the Scouts for being, er, Big Gay Al, sending the new "handi-capable" kid Jimmy to his inevitable showdown with Timmy, or how saying "shit" for the first time on TV brought on the Black Death in "It Hits the Fan." In "Super Best Friends," the boys call on Jesus to thwart the evil of David Blaine (and giant Abe Lincoln), Cartman inherits and blows a fortune on his own amusement park in "Cartmanland," and in "Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants," the boys confront Bin Laden himself (while returning a goat). Oh, and Kenny dies. No, he really dies. Extras: As usual, the bonus features are limited to the always-amusing commentaries, previews and Comedy Central Quickies (don't miss Butters in "Professor Chaos"), but you gotta have season 5. Dave Halverson
Season: A Extras: B+



I ♥ Huckabees

Starring: Jason Schwartzman, Dustin Hoffman, Lily Tomlin

Director: David O. Russell

Released By: 20th Century Fox

Rated: R

Huckabees is a store that sells everything. Its spokesmodel, Dawn, inexplicably dances around in a sexy bikini for its commercials. Her posturing lover, Brad, is a rising executive spearheading a campaign for the mega-corporation, who's gearing up to build a new store on sacred marshland. Albert, a

budding environmentalist who plants trees in the middle of parking lots and begins speeches with "rock, you rock," ignorantly enlists Huckabees to fund his cause. Albert ends up meeting a fireman named Tommy, who cares so much about the environment that he rides his bike to fires. Meanwhile, Albert hires a pair of existential detectives—they "explore existential issues"—to try and discern why he keeps bumping into a towering African. All these screwball characters, broken and searching for some meaning to their life, eventually intertwine, incessantly chattering on about the infinite

and the sad and the particles swirling in space. And that is *I Heart Huckabees*, a meandering wacko comedy that tries to be much more than it ends up being. There's the occasional laugh, but you walk away more perplexed at the strained attempts at a clever, offcenter plot than finding much interest in the characters and their empty philosophizing. Extras: Commentary by director David O. Russell; separate commentaries by Mark Wahlberg, Jason Schwartzman and Naomi Watts. Brady Flechter
Movie: C Extras: C+



Portable computing power

Compaq Presario X6000 Notebook

www.compaq.com

Price: \$1299

While every major notebook manufacturer out there is touting their machine as the true desktop replacement, the X6000 delivers on that promise with its cool looks, impressive horsepower and great options. Under the hood is an Intel P4 w/HT technology running at 3.6GHz. Throw in a gig of DDR 2 SDRAM at 400MHz, a PCI Express ATI Mobility Radeon X600 with 256 MB of RAM and a glorious 17-inch widescreen LCD and you have the ultimate notebook PC. There is nothing like playing Half-Life 2 at 1680x1050 resolution with no performance hits. Games like World of Warcraft, Star Wars: Republic Commando and EverQuest II? Absolutely—this baby can handle it. Other features include 802.11b/g wireless networking, Bluetooth, a 6-in-1 media card reader, DVD+R/RW recordable drive with double-layer support and JBL Pro integrated speakers. But the one thing that sets the X6000 apart from comparable notebooks out there is the price. It may not be as sexy or cool-looking as Voodoo or Alienware, but for \$1,299, we'll be willing to forgo the looks.



Precision driving simulator

Logitech Driving Force Pro

www.logitech.com

Price: \$149.99

While most of you will probably play Gran Turismo 4 with a standard Dual-Shock controller, to experience the game the way it was meant to be, you have to get Logitech's Driving Force Pro. Just plug this bad boy in to your PS2 via USB and you're ready to roll. The solid rubber wheel is not only sturdy but also feels incredibly comfortable in your hands. Manual drivers have a choice of gearshift or paddle shifters on the wheel neck. The standard PS2 buttons—L1, L2, Square, Triangle, etc.—are easily accessible on the front of the wheel. Although the gas and brake pedals perform quite well in gameplay, it would've been nice if they had a little more weight to them. Most impressive about the Driving Force Pro was how exact the force feedback was—it knows when to be forceful and when to be subtle. With all of the variable terrain in the game, like gravel, snow and asphalt, it was nice to feel the different levels of feedback in the wheel. If you want to play GT4 the right way, you gotta get this wheel.



Advanced audio upgrade

Creative Sound Blaster Audigy 4 Pro

www.creative.com

Price: \$299.99

As PC games continue to support 3D surround sound, you're going to want a sound card like the Sound Blaster Audigy 4 Pro so you can experience it all. Utilizing EAX 4.0 Advanced HD effects, gamers will be able to hear multiple environments processed simultaneously to deliver incredibly realistic sounds. The Audigy 4 Pro also supports multi-channel surround, so whether you want 5.1, 6.1 or 7.1, you're covered. Want to watch movies? The Audigy 4 Pro is THX Certified for Cinematic Audio. In addition, it also has built-in DTS-ES and Dolby Digital EX decoding. But what we liked most about the Audigy 4 was the little hub that is included with the card. All of the inputs and outputs you would need are located on the front and back of it. Quite extensive, the hub has two Firewire ports, a MIDI input, RCA SPDIF input and even a pair of old-fashioned RCA jacks. How does it sound? Flawless. Whether watching a DVD movie, listening to music or playing through a 3D action game, the Audigy 4 Pro performed like a champion. The signal-to-noise ratio has been dramatically improved in the Audigy 4, which makes listening to high-quality content (like DVD Audio) that much better.



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